

REFUGE

REVISE

Splendid commitment:
Lucy + Jorge Orta



REPEAT

The work of Lucy and Jorge Orta spans decades. Such is the nature of their research-based artistic practice that matters of social and environmental sustainability need constant rethinking, revising, and re-manifesting. In fact, material artefacts do not make up even half of their projects, forming only the tip of the iceberg as regards research, experimentation, workshops, community engagement, and personal narratives. With Lucy Orta's background in fashion design and Jorge Orta's in fine art and architecture, the pair established a studio in Paris in 1992. They now live and work between Paris and London, and in Les Moulins, where their legacy project entails establishing a collective environment for artistic research in France's former paper-mill valley. Lucy Orta spoke to DAMN° about how the duo's pioneering, socially engaged art remains so contemporary.

TEXT

NADINE BOTHA

Refuge Wear - Habitent, 1992-93
Aluminum, coated polyamide, polar fleece, telescopic aluminium poles, whistle, lantern, compass
125 x 125 x 125 cm / Courtesy of Lucy + Jorge Orta



Refuge Wear - Mobile Cocoon, 1994
Thermo-chromic coated polyester, PU coated polyamide, silkscreen print, fastening
205 x 80 cm / Courtesy of Lucy + Jorge Orta

DAMN°: Studio Orta's prolific output comprises many projects that you've reworked for years. Is this intentional?

Lucy Orta: Absolutely. We see our work as a long-term research process in which – from the outset – we look back at projects, continue to evaluate and work on them, and then reposition them. Their lifespan also depends on the political, social, and economic climate, and on what our commissioning partners are interested in. We navigate between all the different possibilities that arise from fluctuating current affairs and from the collaborations and people we encounter.

DAMN°: Your Refuge Wear project, in particular, seems to have found its moment in the current political climate. How was it received in the 1990s when it first came out?

LO: That was a very difficult period in terms of contemporary art in the domain I was working in, specifically in France. I was based in Paris at the time, where the dominant art community wasn't interested in social projects nor did it see the relevance of contemporary art being involved in social projects. I was criticised, as were the architects and other researchers working in that field. Making

this work was also a response to the institutionalisation of contemporary art and in those terms I was trying to make it a bit more radical. Today of course, we see more and more artists and designers becoming socially engaged, working with local communities and on long-term research-based projects, so the whole situation has changed over these past 20 years. Founding the Man and Humanity Department at Design Academy Eindhoven in 2002 had to do with sustainability becoming mainstream and a significant part of education. To include sustainability and social problems in education was unheard of before 2000.



70 x 7 The Meal, act XL, 2017
NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore
Photo courtesy of Lucy + Jorge Orta

DAMN°: Doesn't it come and go in waves though? After all, the 1970s were sustainability orientated.

LO: Oh yes, but it was very different then, and possibly less about social practice. When I talk about sustainability, I mean both the social and environmental aspects. For the artists working in the 1970s, it was more about the place of man and the place of art in the environment. But artists like Joseph Beuys and Agnes Denes pioneered a socially engaged practice, and we are following in those few artists' footsteps.

DAMN°: With the architecture-type work you produce, especially that which blurs fashion and architecture, you seem to be proposing a modular system of interconnected beings. Is this only conceptual?

LO: It manifests itself in a conceptual way but the processes involved in making works like Nexus Architecture are also about having people involved. It is that involvement that allows for opportunities, connections, and communities to form, as well as reflections on those issues. In representing the projects in exhibitions and online, one often only

sees the formal output, but each of them contains different levels of social practice and engagement. For instance, one of the most poignant processes emerged during the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale. I had involved women from Johannesburg's USINDISO Shelter in a workshop, where they cut and sewed the Nexus Architecture. In one way, it was about teaching women how to pattern-cut and to make and stitch the garments. Once we staged the performance, however, it became much more than that. It was the physical embodiment of this idea of solidarity through performance and through the way the women took over the project as a result of having worked on it for more than two weeks. At the end of the workshop, we told them that they could take the fabric and the patterns and could carry on making the Nexus Architecture. If they wanted to make and sell the work on the market, they didn't need to include the social link that joins the Nexus suits together. But the women declined, saying that it's part of the design and that they would continue to include it. This surprised me. To the women who had performed and had become part of the project, the symbolic content was more important than its functionality. That was really beautiful.

DAMN°: Why are performance and food such integral aspects of your work?

LO: There are various ways of exploring connection, dialogue, and community in the research process. Food – especially the 70 x 7 The Meal projects – have been a very popular way of fostering interaction. Performance has also provided more visibility, as it has allowed for a larger public to witness and become involved in the projects, taking contemporary art out of the confines of the museum and into places where it wouldn't normally occur or be seen. That these fields have merged and blurred is also part of the interdisciplinarity so prevalent now in design and contemporary art, thankfully.