

Title, Body Architectures, Survival Clothes

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“Since to inhabit a space means to consider it part of one’s body”, Lucy Orta maintains, “clothes are fully entitled to become architectural dwellings, temporary shelters affording protection against cold and storms in the stopping-places on the long journey of our existence”. The survival clothing designed by Lucy Orta is the expression of a relational aesthetic that becomes a tool for the struggle against exclusion.

Andreas Kartak, the unforgettable main character in the story *The Legend of the Holy Drinker* (Die Legende vom heiligen Trinker) by Joseph Roth, describes himself as a “man of honour, even if with no address”.

A young woman artist has made these men (and women) of no fixed abode – the ones we sometimes risk tripping over and avoid looking at in embarrassment – the centre of her expressive research. Touched by the sufferings of this derelict humanity, Lucy Orta reacted with innovative and provocative propositions, in which social commitment harnesses the codes of body art, design and architecture, but also the techniques of fashion. As Pierre Restany has written, “her creations, at once poetic and functional, give a real sense to the “outdated” concepts of activism, solidarity and social obligation” (Domus 793); creations which the critic defines elsewhere as “social engineering”.

Born near in Birmingham in 1966, and married to Argentine land artist Jorge Orta, Lucy has been active in Paris since 1991. Drawing on her training as a fashion/textile designer, she made her debut designing Refuge Wear for urban emergencies and natural catastrophes. Made by exploiting the properties of new synthetic fabrics, her Refuge Wear consists of mini corporal architectures, sustained by light weaves on carbon fibre, which are rapidly assembled (or rather, transformed) by means of a system of pockets, zips and Velcro fasteners.

Her tent-suit (Habitent 1992), now a Lucy Orta classic, takes the form of a waterproof wind-jacket in silvered fabric. With the aid of a collapsible arch-frame, it converts into a refuge for its wearer. Later, she produced a survival kit (Life Line, 1995) into which are gathered utensils, provisions and accessories to help the outcast recapture his or her lost identity.

Experimenting with a tent-suit, the “normal” is lowered into the precarious conditions of the landless and homeless, and succeeds perhaps in breaking the indifference behind which bad conscience is concealed.

The vagrant misses not so much a home as affection. Social bonds are based on physical bonds, which in their turn generate social ones. With these convictions, Lucy Orta arrived at the definition of her Collective Wear (1993), capable of accommodating up to thirty people. The concept of shared space was further clarified with Nexus Architecture (1994), a project featuring a series of overalls. These were “connected” so as to create an interaction between the individual and his or her immediate neighbour. Heat passes from one body to the next, but above all the “human chain” gives visibility (and thus reality) to the excluded. Nexus Architecture presented in South Africa, the USA, Mexico, Bolivia and Italy through exhibitions, workshops and performances, denounced the various forms of marginalization with a greater impact and immediacy than any protest could. Lucy Orta’s designs show how each of our lives depends on that of others and how strong collective action can be, as symbolized by the “umbilical cord” that joins the various “outer casings” together. The concept is elaborated more precisely in her Modular Architecture, a project in which inflatable sleeping-bags are joined together to form a single huge tube (in which the heat of bodies circulates and keeps every one warm); as well as the tents, igloos and modular cabins, on which the exhibition devoted to the artist by the Cartier Foundation was constructed, (Paris 1997).

Lucy Orta however does not forget her “textile” background: her message in fact is also entrusted to the material of which the “clothes” are made, and to the words that are impressed upon them. She makes use of technical fabrics as if they were a membrane, a second skin, but also as walls of

corporal architectures delimiting personal space. As an artist sensitive to signals picked up from the streets, Lucy impresses texts, symbols and images on her fabrics; a once graffiti and tatoos, they reinforce and sharpen the denunciation which is implicit in all her work.

This applies even when her artistic expression relies on other idioms and other materials. With the Commune Communicate workshop (Metz 1996), Orta managed to establish a relationship between the inmates of Metz prison and the outside world. She went round the streets of the French town carrying a folding Perspex table designed by prisoners, on which were impressed emblematic images of life (or dreams) in the prison. She asked people to listen the recorded voices of prisoners, and reproduced the comments made by members of a free public. With this collected material the inmates produced a video. During "All In One Basket" (Les Halles, Paris 1997), a performance which aimed to elicit public opinion on food wastage, passers-by were invited to sample excellent foods prepared by a famous chef, using ingredients that are thrown away as garbage in daily markets, and which are normally gleaned by needy people before they get as far as urban refuse disposal. With the Citizen Platform/Citizen Trolley project (La Villete, Paris 1997), Lucy parked on the avenues of the famous scientific park a small mobile metal architecture. Here citizens were able to fill out cards with suggestions to the mayor of Paris and to the Ministry of Environment on how to reduce refuse and to encourage its reuse and recycling.

In her more recent projects Lucy Orta has spotlighted the human body again, working on solutions to guarantee survival in emergency situations (shipwrecks) or in defence against the dangers of pollution. Without belying her social commitment, the proposals seem to probe technical detail and to open up to a more concrete product reality. Her collaboration with an Italian clothing manufacturer also suggests that Orta's work is departing from its experimental phase. The presence of some of a new work "Connector" at a recent trade fair in Florence (Pitti Uomo 2000), though on the one hand surprising, should on the other be interpreted as a "stone in the pond", thrown into a world – the fashion world – where Lucy Orta's cherished theme for the moment is "no fixed abode".

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