

Title, Drink Water⁰¹

Poetic Strategies for Living in the World

Author, Gabi Scardi, Art critic and curator

'Orta DrinkWater', Gli Ori Italy 2005 ISBN 88-7336-169-2

Large organic structures, labyrinthine agglomerates of metal and tubing that evoke the circulation of blood and the network of waterways that garland the planet. Organic glass and canvas extensions, orderly series of jerry cans and bottles mounted on rudimentary vehicles: tricycles; canoes; little boats; modest, functional and eager Piaggio Ape 50. And then come the sleeping bags, vests, shelves, bicycles and jalopies. Numerous long pipes run through space; one of these links the inside to the outside, like an umbilical cord, goes through the wall of a room and ends up in the canal, from which it draws water –the brackish and horribly dirty water of Venice. The water is pumped, purified and made drinkable. It will then be bottled and distributed to the public, as "Orta Water."

A low rumble fills the room, a dull sound that conjures up the gurgling of the ocean's depths and the disparate noises of that pervade the air during production. Everything evokes circulation, flow, mobility, and interconnection; that incessant activity that keeps all of our bodies, and that of society, pulsating, and that animates, at every moment, the living part of the planet, the biosphere.

The projects of Lucy and Jorge Orta stem from the idea that the imagination is a means of constructing the world and that the images we produce can help to model sustainable forms of development and possible new modes of coexistence.

Drink Water, the subject of the exhibition staged by the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and this book of drawings, came to be because of the realization that the planet is thirsty. Water is the origin, the source of life. It is the fountain of youth. It is purity. It is everything: survival and well-being. And it is everywhere, around us and inside us. And yet a billion people suffer the tragic consequences of not having access to clean water. The number of countries in this situation is soaring. The sustainable use of the world's water reserves requires their limited and efficient exploitation and the equitable allocation of available resources –generally speaking, these things are not being done.

On the contrary, human activity is having such a negative effect on the natural workings of the planet that the ecosystems that make up the biosphere –and one of these is the supply of water –of which 60% appear to be degraded, are no longer able to guarantee the fundamental functions that enable life on Earth. The consequences are thirst and the fact that millions of people throughout the world have to rely on water supplies that represent a health risk. In *Life's Matrix: A Biography of Water*, Philip Ball tells us that, "...around 80 percent of all diseases and one-third of the deaths in developing countries are the result of contaminated water."

We are all to some extent aware of this situation. We know that none of us can treat resources as if they existed solely for our own benefit, but that they are entrusted to each one of us on behalf of the planet, and that from now on our survival on Earth will depend on the choices we make. But our reactions are half-hearted. To react to this emergency would mean recognizing that those who have access to the planet's resources also have an effect on those who do not. People who have more owe something to those who have less –this constitutes an overwhelming responsibility.

Lucy and Jorge Orta are aware of the signals coming from the world around them and of today's burning questions. They are conscious that the age in which we live presents challenges and threats of change that we have never encountered. They are ready to grapple with major social and environmental issues: from the phenomena of mobility and the new forms of nomadism that affect people and things, to the need to pay new attention to the interactions between cultures and global interdependence, and recycling, which is perceived as a form of active resistance to the standardizing forces of the present. For the Ortas, art is more than a paradigm of the fundamental needs and aspirations of the individual; it is also a vehicle for confrontation with the wider context and a redefinition of the responsibilities that face each and every one of us.

Each of their projects arises from the need to conceive and poetically formulate new possibilities for living in our world: to shape hypotheses for change and to design for the future. In their actions Lucy and Jorge Orta are driven primarily by a desire to communicate that is based on the common elements in the message and its urgency as well as the language and the immediacy of its impact. Their intention is not to produce functional objects. Their installations are effective to the extent that they evoke the necessity for growth and change. They are neither immediately practical nor merely utopian, but are instead demonstrative. It is clear that the communal clothing, refuge-backpacks, tent-garments, pieces of modular and flexible architecture and the kitchen-trolleys for which Lucy Orta is known, although technologically perfect in every detail, do not constitute an effective solution to the problems of the homeless, of malnutrition or water shortages. They cannot meet the needs of the people living on the streets of our cities or those who venture into the wild under extreme conditions. The pipes, cans and bottles mounted on rudimentary means of transport and the mobile systems for the filtering and distribution of water do not directly result in efficiency, fairness, or the protection of ecosystems, nor will they ever be able to bridge the gap between those who have enough to live on and those who do not. These problems require complex and radical solutions that cannot be provided by an artist. The reality to which their work gives rise is a paradoxical one, made up of objects that are useless, but of intrinsic necessity.

For Lucy and Jorge Orta art, -just as science, technology, architecture and any discipline that is an expression of the human spirit- is a yearning to construct, a capacity to activate processes of generation. It is a form of planning in the sense of a readiness to set out from the present and steer towards new horizons. Art is a resource given to individuals so they can see themselves such as they are and to bolster their ability to challenge the new forms of uniformization that cut through consciousness and make human beings unhappy, lost and ignorant. Lucy and Jorge Orta have rejected the conflict between logical rationality and the intuitive aspects of research, between imagination and concrete practice, between planning and doing, between passion and rigor. They produce poetic and polemical installations that represent the product of a confluence of functional, economic, architectural, environmental, social, and creative aspirations that always express the vision of the individual in a context of relationships.

Fundamental to this very serious game is the moment at which latent interests aggregate around the issue that is destined to become the core of the project. Energies are then mobilized in the desire to convey its urgency and identify poetic solutions for it.

In many cases the projects of the Studio Orta take shape through a phase of collective work that is carried out in a workshop setting. The process thus becomes genuine research. It is the introduction of an interdisciplinary approach, a blend of skills and personal qualities that underpins the all of the activity at Studio Orta. All of this is representative of the desire to establish new connections, to trigger that sharing of experiences and common values that the works will then go on to evoke and activate.

The aspect of design also finds expression in the multitude of preparatory drawings included in this book, along with extracts from the texts that, as theoretical analyses, accompany the work. They are inventive, open, mutable drawings, that converge mental processes, research, growth, elements of chance, curiosity, a playful spirit, as well as the commitment and the rigor that everyone needs to play a part in imagining new directions for the future.