

Antarctica World Passport Bureau, COP21 Grand Palais Paris

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At the COP21 Climate Summit in Paris last December, a throng of delegates queued up for a new type of travel document. These representatives were signing up for an Antarctica World Passport, a project devised by the husband-and-wife team Lucy and Jorge Orta, whose “environmentally and socially engaged” art practice, honed over the past 25 years, is the focus of two major shows in the UK and the US.

UK-born Lucy Orta wrote in The Huffington Post about the motivation and methods behind the passport scheme, an ongoing participatory art piece. “The recipient simply has to agree to the obligations accompanying the Antarctica World Citizenship on antarcticaworldpassport.com, in return for a UIN (unique identification number), and they are invited to traverse the frontier through a small wooden passageway.” Joining this community of “collective world citizens” means adhering to key commitments such as accounting for one’s daily footprint.

At the end of the walkway, a second passport officer stamps the passport, authenticating both the work of art and the world citizenship. The Ortas never turn anyone away; indeed, three editions totalling 55,000 passports have been printed and more than 12,000 people have signed up online, ranging from government ministers to journalists and lawyers, says Lucy Orta. She stresses that phase two of the project involves “working with the critical mass” of passport-holders, which could involve setting up permanent offices worldwide.

The passports were first printed in 2008 after the couple returned to Europe from Antarctica, where they developed their project ‘Antarctic Village—No Borders’, a string of dome dwellings which littered the uninhabited glacier terrain (the makeshift shelters, a commission for The End of the World biennale, were made from the flags of the 53 nations that signed the 1959 Antarctic Treaty—a pact that bans all military activity across the nuclear-free South Pole). “It’s the ephemeral element that counts, rather like Christo’s art—the tent-like domes on the landscape stay in the mind,” says Lucy Orta.

The Ortas are showing a selection of works created for their 2007 expedition to the Antarctica in an exhibition at the Attenborough Arts Centre, part of the University of Leicester. The sculptures and installations on view (until 24 April) span the past two decades of the Ortas’ career, incorporating two of their other long-running projects, ‘Amazonia’ (2009, ongoing) and ‘OrtaWater’ (2005, ongoing), a water purification initiative.

The Orta retrospective marks the launch of a £1.5m gallery extension at the centre, which was founded by the late film director and actor Richard Attenborough in 1997. Last month [29 January], his brother, the broadcaster David Attenborough, inaugurated the new 530 square-metre wing (the family is rooted in the city; their father, Frederick was Principal of the University College, Leicester).

Sam West, visual art officer at the Attenborough Arts Centre, says that the Ortas’ outlook neatly dovetails with the centre’s ethos. “Lucy and Jorge’s work excited us on many levels: their practice reflects our interests in socially-engaged practice and cultural activism, it’s research-lead and it is interdisciplinary. We wanted to make an exhibition which was political and issue-based, but at the same time it needed to be exciting and entertaining.”

Ortas’ work also struck a chord with Attenborough, who appeared transfixed by a new multi-media installation commissioned by the University of Leicester called Symphony for Absent Wildlife. The

work comprises a wind-orchestra of 20 musicians dressed in utilitarian felt tailcoats topped with sculpted masks depicting endangered woodland creatures.

A symphony of birdsong snowballs until the room is plunged into darkness (the work, off-putting at first, becomes more compelling as the soundtrack explodes). Attenborough commented that “art makes a direct appeal to the emotions—just like the [Orta] exhibits I’ve seen”.

The Leicester show, a neat symbiosis of their multi-pronged aesthetic, feels especially prescient in these turbulent times. “These are not linear bodies of work, they interconnect,” Orta, says pointing to a piece called Connector Body Architecture (2002-14), a wall-mounted assemblage of bivouacs clustered around a lacquered glass mount.

“The challenges the world is facing today are interconnected: water scarcity and migration, climate change and species loss, food health and the state of the planet. We know, for instance, there’s going to be migration problems because of water shortage,” she adds, grimacing at the suggestion that the pair are eco-warriors. “We don’t want to be labelled as eco-artists—certainly not! It’s not just about ecology. There’s so much more than that.”

“I don’t think you can divide the Ortas into being either artists or activists. They have an inclusive practice, working with highly relevant and meaningful material, while the thoughtful and aesthetic value of their work engages a broad public,” says Clare Lilley, the director of programme at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where the artists unveiled a series of new works in 2013, including The Raft of Medusa.

The artists’ exhibition wall text in Leicester gives the best analogy, describing their creative process as a tree branching off in different directions: the trunk represents their solid, grounded conceptual approach, the branches symbolise the complex, evolving issues that spin off from their investigations (the self-penned treatise is surprisingly eloquent rather than hackneyed).

This all sounds very righteous, and more than a little worthy, but there’s no doubting the pair’s commitment to their various causes. They founded Studio Orta in Paris in 1991, and boast multifarious CVs; Lucy Orta has a degree in fashion-knitwear design from Nottingham Trent University, and is also the Chair of Art and the Environment at the University of the Arts London. Jorge, an influential video and mail art practitioner, was a key member of an underground artist network during the Argentine dictatorship of the 1970s, but left his home country in 1984 to study at the Sorbonne in Paris.

A turning point came in 2000 when they acquired four paper mills and factories in the valley of Le Grand Morin in Seine-et-Marne, around 60 kilometres east of Paris. Their cultural complex—an eight-kilometre riverside stretch named Les Moulins—is one of the art world’s best kept secrets.

The couple aim to launch a sculpture park in the rural setting, and support the creation of experimental in-situ works there through workshops and residencies. Their next large-scale project is a public art piece for the Emscherkunst Triennial in the Ruhr region of west Germany, which opens in June.

They are now at a crossroads with a recent move into the US. Works from the Antarctica project are on show in the pair’s first show in New York at Jane Lombard Gallery (until 20 February). Lucy Orta says, however, that they are not driven by the market, and have always relied on public gallery and museum commissions, along with funding awards from public bodies.

So what will America, and its art world, make of their brand of activist art? “The individual objects are very collectable, aesthetically beautiful and meaningful. The larger scale work and installations appeal to museums, institutions and corporate collections,” says Lisa Carlson of the gallery. Meanwhile, the Antarctica World Passport Delivery Bureau has rolled up in the city as part of the show—and citizens of the world continue to enroll, intent on being part of the Orta community.