
Special thanks to Cécile Barrault at Studio Orta
STUDIO ORTA has been creating habitable, protective artworks responding to the realities of forced migration since the early 90s. For GARAGE No. 13, NADAV KANDER shoots these transformational creations.

Lucy + Jorge Orta’s practice is poised at the crossroads of visual art, fashion design, and political activism. For 25 years, the London- and Paris-based duo has tackled some of the world’s most pressing social and ecological issues. They served dinner cooked from food waste to thousands of guests. They set up the ephemeral Antarctic Village to celebrate the Antarctica Treaty, which protects the world’s largest ice desert for scientific research, and the very real utopia of the only spot on earth not claimed by nation. They recorded all the species in a one-hectare plot in the Peruvian rainforest then turned them into glass sculptures.

In Refuge Wear and Body Architecture, the Ortas tackled the ongoing refugee crisis and the global scale of forced migration. Both works radically redefine the porous border between clothing and dwelling. Here, Lucy Orta revisits the origin of a body of work that feels more urgent than ever:

“Jorge and I started working together as the First Gulf War broke out. The situation was particularly horrific: millions of Kurdish and Iraqi refugees were forced to flee. The war also led to a deep economic recession across the world, and homelessness was on the rise everywhere. So we began working on the idea of the item of clothing as habitat—hybrid garments specifically conceived to answer the needs of migrant populations. We called it Refuge Wear, and it was defined by three main functions: mobility, portability, and wearability. It manifested itself, for example, as sleeping bags that turn into anoraks and ponchos that turn into tents, and vice versa. Key for us was that possibility for something to become something else—the transformability.

At the time I was particularly interested in developments in textiles. The technical properties of new fabrics were fascinating and they would also operate metaphorically, bringing another layer of meaning to the work. If a fabric had a membrane that was permeable, for instance, it allowed for a transition from inside to outside. Likewise, an aluminium coating evoked something of the reflection of the individual against society. Initially I produced prototypes in the studio but quickly tested them in performative situations, encouraging the public to confront the reality of homelessness.”

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