

## **Title, Dwelling X – Lucy Orta**

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Lucy Orta, whose work is the subject of a major retrospective at the Barbican Curve Gallery from September to December 2005, deconstructs and probes the cultural construction of 'home' and 'homeliness' through the medium of an art practice, which fuses fashion and architecture. Using the shiny, synthetic fabrics and strong colours typical of high-tech camping gear or ski-wear, she acts as instigator and catalyst for the construction of personal and collective structures out of slippery membranes which are conceived as minimal, but high-performing, 'refuges' from the elements, capable of expressing social bonds in a striking, even strident, visual manner which subverts the firmly bounded social hierarchies of dwelling embedded in conventional built structures. As Orta points out, 'to be homeless in a media culture such as ours is therefore to be rendered invisible; to melt literally into the margins and framework of the city.' Without the architectural framework, the embodied culture, of solid bricks and mortar, a human being is effectively removed out of the social context and dissolves into thin air.

In 2004 Orta worked in collaboration with the engineer Aran Chadwick, of Atelier One, on Dwelling X, the most recent episode of a series of public space interventions, which she has been designing and orchestrating since 1993. At that time she began working on concepts for a series of temporary sheltering structures, designed as 'Refuge Wear' in response to situations of human distress and unsuitable social environments. These began transforming into items of clothing and transport bags, which she named Body Architecture. Dwelling X, which was installed in Nottingham's Market Square, represents a kind of culmination of this work, whereby the lightweight structural skeletons which give shape and form to Orta's Body Architecture start to separate out from the protective membrane, each taking on its own autonomous existence. Here, the contoured structure of welded aluminium tubing seems to take on a life and movement of its own, slithering off the truck that transports it, nomad-like, from one location to the next, and into the public space like a strange organism.

It seems natural that Dwelling X has developed into a new collaborative project with Chadwick on what might be seen as a purely structural concept: a new bridge, Totipotent Architecture, for Birmingham, created out of contour hooping, where structure itself will become volume. But up until now, it has been the slippery surfaces of Orta's body wear which have provided the medium for inscribing cultural practices of social interaction and disconnection. In fact, the Nottingham project is distinctive also because of the ethereal, abstract quality of the membrane, a translucent, pale organic form, made of traditional nylon ripstop, printed with the graphic images and silhouettes created by the participants involved in the collaborative working processes – or 'co-creation' - out of which the final artefacts evolve in many of her projects.

Dwelling X developed through a range of local workshops organised into three different age groups over three weeks in the summer of 2003. Run by local artists – Trina Bramman, Trish Evans and Marcus Rowlands, in dialogue with Katy Culbard, Visual Arts Access Officer at Angel Row Gallery - these brought together different groups of people to explore the idea of 'social membrane' and 'mobile habitat' represented by temporary public sculptures. The workshops provided a forum for participants to 'investigate the layers around the body, mobility, individual and group identity ... allow[ing] for culturally diverse individuals to recognise their importance in a community structure and discover the uniqueness of their personal and cultural individuality.'

Unfortunately, Dwelling X's projected journey to and installation in Sunderland during 2005 did not materialise, but Lucy Orta has implemented the concept of co-creation in many different locations over the years. In 1997, she conducted workshops in Soweto, resulting in the Nexus Architecture. In 1999 she worked on a project called Nexus Village Fete at Bourneville in Britain, then with a group of migrant women from Johannesburg, and subsequently in Toulouse and Cologne. In 2002, Nexus Architecture x110 was installed in a temporary gallery on the other side

of the Atlantic, in Miami: every installation included the statement: "Me, I've got a lot to say", borrowed from a participant in an early workshop at the Le Corbusier Salvation Army hostel in Paris. Refuge Wear Interventions were also staged in London against the backdrop of distinctive modernist housing estates, including Erno Goldfinger's Trellick Tower, and Chamberlain Powell and Bonn's Barbican. Of the Refuge Wear and Nexus Architecture projects, Orta has written: "I utilised the street in an investigative manner, questioning the individual's right to occupy public space rather than becoming subsumed by the architecture. By reclaiming public space, these projects sought to empower marginalised individuals and render them more visible." (*Lucy Orta*, Phaidon 2003. p 14).

In 1998 and 1999 Orta staged her Collective Dwelling interventions in Glasgow's Gorbals district and in New York. This project, like the others, took the form of a series of workshops that, in this case, were launched for the first time in Thiers, France, involving the participation of teenagers from a local secondary school and foster home. They were asked to create sections, or 'modules', which were combined to form a larger work, expressing the identity of individuals as components within a connected and united whole.

The overtly political dimension of Orta's work, the concern to make visible the neglected or overlooked constituents of society, was underscored by her appearance at the G8 Environment Summit in 2001, where she installed her Connector Mobile Village and M.I.U.s (Mobile Intervention Units). These reconditioned military Red Cross ambulances provided the basic modules of a mobile infrastructure which could constitute forum and refuge, equipped with individual Survival Sacs that could be linked together to form a fluid, fabric architecture of shelter, and network for social space.

In Orta's work, body suits, body bags, tents, and military vehicles come together to create the portable and ever-evolving structures of a continuing artistic project, blurring the boundaries of fashion and architecture, which is intensely focussed on probing questions of identity, the body and ideas of home.