

Title, An archaeology of the social link

Author, Trevor Smith

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It has now been ten years since Lucy Orta introduced *Refuge Wear*, garments designed to care for the urgent needs of individuals living in crisis situations. These transformative objects facilitated shelter, mobility and created a space where its user could engage or withdraw from the world as they chose. High-tech fabrics, more commonly seen in the latest camping or hiking gear, were utilised in pieces such as the habitent – in which a poncho could be transformed into a tent – or the ambulatory survival sac – a boiler suit that converted into a sleeping bag. In time, silk-screened images or words appeared: images of a safety rope, a compass, cellular structures, hearts, headlines, philosophical or declarative texts that proposed something about social interconnectedness.

Orta has said that *Refuge Wear* was created as a response to the Gulf War. One can see in it a 'what if?' collapsing of two recurrent media images: displaced populations under constant physical threat and soldiers in high-tech isolation suits designed to protect them from biological and chemical agents. As clothing becomes shelter, the human body is abstracted and architecture is anthropomorphized – the raincoat draping loosely over a body transforms into a tensile structure with an appendage. These qualities became even more pointed in the *Collective Wear* that were, as their name suggests, designed for groups of people to use. Sometimes these were single units, such as *Collective Wear 4 Persons* – a tent with four hoods, eight arms and legs. More frequently they were structures in which people could zip themselves together or unzip and move apart. *The Collective Survival Sac* are twinned cocoon-like sacs while *Collective Wear 16 Persons* were screen-printed boiler suits with detachable tubes connecting the suits together in a row. Even as it continued to evoke the dystopian iconography of isolation suits for the homeless, *Collective Wear* literalises images of something deeper: cooperation, mutual dependence and social responsibility.

If Orta's work exhibits a tension between pastoral potential – shelter for people in urgent situations – and agit-prop realisation that transformed anonymous individuals into a public sign of their crisis – it is a tension that Orta could not in a sense avoid. Having the 'homeless' make a spectacle of themselves was a strategy to negotiate a crisis of political representation in which traditional forms of protest had been rendered mute by aesthetic stasis and thus left open to further disempowerment by media and political stereotyping.¹ Margaret Thatcher's modest proposal during the 1984 Miners Strike that "There is no such thing as society" is an early and exceedingly clear example of how completely economic fundamentalism conflated human desires and needs with the fun house mirror of their economic representation.

Proposing that the physical link creates the social link, the *Collective Wear* literally linked people together into collective structures. In this crisis of representation however, it is important to recognise that even as individuals were isolated in their *Refuge Wear*, a 'retinal link' was established between the person in need and those who might do something about their condition. Even in the *Collective Wear*, the physical link produces an image of collective responsibility and co-operation that is in retreat all around us. Orta provides an iconography of social connectivity, links that must be envisioned symbolically so that they might be more broadly enacted.

¹ As *Refuge Wear* never went into mass production, the spectacles were produced as 'interventions' by small groups of people who were not always, of course, homeless. [could introduce workshops here]. It should also be noted that at a much larger scale in the United States, groups like *Act Up* made their protests effective by a reinvigoration of aesthetic strategies and theatricalisation.

If Orta's abstraction of the human body and the conflation of bodies and technology have a broad resonance in contemporary society, it is also an iconography that has been deployed since the First World War at moments of representational crisis when artists have been confronted with acts of enormity and social violence.² One can also see in her work aspects of military, industrial, and marine iconography – curiously enough, fields of endeavour that have taken humankind to places that would not be possible without technology.

Orta constructs such a strong link between primitive human needs –shelter and community – and contemporary social realities that a historical dimension is often masked. Describing Orta's work in 1995, Paul Virilio evoked the power of this nexus when he described the *Refuge Wear* as:

a style of rock painting inscribed on the body. Enveloped in Lucy's overalls, the being bears witness to the threat towards the body. This threat is linked not only to problems of unemployment and precariousness, factors which, as an architect, interest me a lot, but also to the drowning of the body in virtuality, to the creation of clones, and to a remote intimacy. Lucy's collective wear reminds me of collective body practices which exist in the world of survival. The survival of most animals depends on running with the pack. The concept of the pack is linked to animality. Lucy's collective wear represents a denunciation of man's return to the pack. At a time when we are told that men are free, emancipated, totally autonomous, she tells us that, on the contrary, there is a threat and that man is regrouping. We refer to this new phenomenon in terms of gangs, new tribes, commandos.

As Orta's work has developed, particularly with the Nexus Architecture, the historical dimension has come to play a more prominent role. *Life Nexus Village Fete* 1999 for example, necessitates an historical practice whose collective force has largely been dissipated by the more spectacular entertainments on offer in the contemporary environment. The village fete was for centuries an important activity in the life of a village and provided context for the whole community to participate in a collective action. Like many of her works, the *Village Fete* is participatory and includes a workshop component wherein participants actually make the props and games that will animate the Fete. These games are traditional fete activities, such as Aorta may have remembered as a child, can pyramids, fishing, sac races [Lucy: at this point you might like to list the proper names of the games so I could incorporate them]. What makes Orta's Fete particular is the way in which these activities are structured as a meditation on the heart, a centuries old symbol of loving care. The heart is a recurrent symbol in Orta's work and it derives from her husband Jorge Orta's work on the heart as a cross-cultural symbol of connection and unity. In this work, the iconography of the heart becomes a retinal and metaphysical link.

Even as they share many commonalities, the basis for *Collective Wear* is fashion while the *Village Fete* is architecture. The abstracted anthropomorphism of *Collective Wear* becomes in the *Village Fete* consists of tent structures that migrate between use as shelter and as the backdrop to the Village Fete. Just as the twin cocoon introduces the direct physical link and began to join individual units together, the addition of the *Life nexus foyer* to the *Village Fete* broke away from the strict recti linearity of the links to this date. Moving away from a grid into apparently more organic formations, the links between the tents were large enough to crawl through and play in whereas in the *Collective Wear*, the links only bound people together. The multi-functionality of architectural links as opposed to the symbolic links of fashion, have played an increasingly important role in recent works such as the *Connector* series of works which take their name from the link itself. The *Connector* series places increased emphasis on the links, that are now numbered, almost like street signs. The body suits that were first presented in the *Collective Wear* are here even more abstracted, with just hoods and sometimes arms left as visible signifiers of the body. It is almost as if the overarching logic of the work has now moved from the logic of fashion, to that of architecture to that of urban planning.

² Consider Futurism, Picabia, British Surrealism, Hans Belmer, Guernica. One can also see work by Lygia being added to this trans-historical incantation.

