

LUCY + JORGE ORTA
LIGHT WORKS

black dog
publishing



GABRIELLA SALGADO

Printing with LIGHT

In 1946, Argentine artist Gyula Kosice made the first light-based sculpture, a simple form made of neon, years before the widespread use of the material by American and European Minimalist artists.¹ However, the recognition of this groundbreaking artwork as pioneering in the use of electric light is notably recent. The history of twentieth century art as known in Western countries seems to disregard key moments of innovation in art-making that blossomed in the rest of the world, producing dynamic currents and breakthroughs. Gyula Kosice's theoretical approach to art was based in an experimental use of materials and processes including water, light and mechanical movement; but also contributed to expanding the realm of art from the confined space of galleries and museums to the streets through actions and interventions in the 1940s.

Madi's emancipatory premises were to be explored and developed further by artists in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela from the 1950s to the 1970s, fostering various material and philosophical breakthroughs such as Brazilian *Neoconcretismo*, the Kinetic art movement in Venezuela and *Tucumán Arde* and the Experimental Art Week in Rosario, Argentina. These initiatives were echoing the concerns of European and American artists such as those associated with Fluxus who in the same period were investigating indeterminacy, questioning authorship and including chance elements in their work.

In Latin America one of the artists who embraced an art to be completed by the experience of the viewer was Argentine artist Julio Le Parc, born in 1928 in the Andean province of Mendoza. In 1942, when he was still an adolescent, Le Parc moved with his family to Buenos Aires, where he studied at the Manuel Belgrano Art School under the tutelage of Rosario-born Lucio Fontana. By that time Fontana was in the process of formulating his groundbreaking "White Manifesto", while sharing his ideas on Spatialism with his students, whom as Le Parc recalled, where made responsible for signing the manifesto.² In it, Fontana advocated for an art made with the help of scientists, whose research should be directed "...towards the discovery of the luminous and malleable substances and the sound-producing instruments which will make possible the development of tetra dimensional art."³

In an attempt to materialise these principles—already explored by artists like László Moholy-Nagy in the early 1920s—Fontana developed a series of experimental works in the 1950s, which incorporated filters for light projections and movement from television emissions.⁴ Le Parc became interested in the investigation of light as material. But in parallel to his formal discoveries, the social intention of his practice manifested in a particularly acute interest in activating the viewer through

mechanical devises. Le Parc's highly poetic light structures are constructed by means of very basic technologies, principally mechanical and electrical, that he applied to create his kinetic sculptures. But most significantly, these developments were accompanied by a theoretical reflection on the role of art in social relations. After his formative years, Le Parc obtained a grant from the French Cultural Services, which allowed him to travel to Paris in 1958, where he still resides. In Paris he met Vasarely, Vantongerloo, Morellet and the French dealer Denise René and in 1960 became one of the founders of the *Groupe de la Recherche d'Art Visuel* (GRAV).⁵ The group, formed by the artists, Sobrino, Yvaral, Morellet, Stein and García Rossi, proposed collective strategies devised to delegate the creative act to the viewer/participant, a concept of much currency in contemporary art today. The principle of stimulating the creative force within humans—later enunciated by Beuys in his legendary "Everybody is an artist" mantra—became a deep preoccupation for the group that advocated that art play a wider, more active role in society.⁶ Alongside Le Parc's investigation of light with mechanical means Venezuelan artists Carlos Cruz-Diez and Alejandro Soto, also based in Paris and exhibiting at Galerie Denise René, sustained a production of paintings, reliefs and sculptural installations that led to the flourishing of Kineticism in the 1960s.

The acknowledgement of such a continuum of experimental art practices is fundamental to contextualise Jorge Orta's trajectory, his interest in light, his understanding of the link between images and content and his emphasis on the role of art as a vehicle of communication.

Born in Rosario, Argentina in 1953 Jorge Orta began his career in painting and printmaking, after graduating from the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Architecture of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario in 1979 and 1980. In response to the censorship established by the Argentine military regime that ruled from 1976 to 1983 his practice expanded to include non-objectual alternative forms of visual communication, such as Mail Art and performance, widely practiced throughout South America in the 1970s as strategies of resistance.⁷ From this formative period of experimentation until the realisation of his first light-based large-scale public artwork in 1991 in Paris, Orta embarked on the investigation of the possibilities of using images in public space. This impulse was driven by an acute sense of the ethical dimension of art, a commitment that has shaped his artistic endeavours through to the present.

The Light Works that became a trademark of his practice are anchored in drawing and the elaboration of a sign-based

conceptual structure: a planetary alphabet that Orta started devising in 1974.

The alphabet encompassed formal and conceptual elements common to a diversity of cultures and was initially composed of a family of signs named *makos*—a term coined by the artist—with the purpose of serving the communication of codified meaning. The *makos* consisted of anthropomorphic shapes that mirrored social reality, including individual pictograms congregated as human groups: an iconographic Latin American community built by the imagination. Formally, the *makos* inhabit a visual space that exists between the representation of the human form and language signs. The alphabet was conceived as a means to represent inherently human archetypes and it referenced symbols, pictograms, and a varied repertoire of archaeological material. A permanently evolving system made of thousands of signs, the alphabet is politically complex as it somehow abolishes concepts of national identity in favour of a global vocabulary, a widely accepted concept in the twenty-first century, but certainly less common in the mid-1970s. The creation of the planetary alphabet became pivotal in Orta's visual language: it is present in his works made as a solo artist and continues to feature in the works made in collaboration with his partner Lucy with whom he founded Studio Orta in Paris in 1992. But most importantly, the planetary alphabet is at the core of the visual makeup of the Light Works to which we devote this essay.

Public art in the era of terror

In 1978 Jorge Orta had begun creating public interventions in his city of birth, Rosario, with the aim to bridge the gap with a wider public beyond the specialist audiences of art. Taking the form of Mail Art, performance, and projections in public spaces using the basic early image technologies such as slide projectors, these works predate the Light Works he made in Europe, which helped him achieve international recognition.

The first work of the series was *Transcurso Vital* (*Life Path*) in 1978, which can be considered the precursor of all the Light Works and was presented in a public square in Orta's Rosario neighbourhood, Fishertown. *Transcurso Vital* employed 16 Kodak carousel projectors synchronised to back project images on eight screens placed in a semi-circle. The projections were screened in sequence blending into each other: a simple strategy to create a cinematic effect while a performance was simultaneously presented on a stage. *Transcurso Vital* is described by the artist as "a personal and collective path, a conviction communicated visually through a set of Christian symbols—the cross, blood, and the lifeline represented by a rope". The work employed the most sophisticated technologies available at the time to project images drawn from Christian iconography in a public space, becoming a work of political resistance. A 2,000 strong audience saw it at a time when the



Transcurso Vital, 1978
Performance in front of 2,000 spectators
Plaza Vicene Lopez y Planes, Rosario, Argentina



Fusión de Sangre Latinoamericana, 1984
Performance
Bernardino Rivadavia centro cultural Rosario, Argentina



Resbalar sobre la Sangre, 1985
Performance
La Sorbonne Paris, France



Arte Portable, 1983
Street catwalk
Calle Córdoba de Rosario, Argentina



Arte Correo, 1980-1984
Mail Art
Rosario, Argentina



law strictly prohibited public gatherings, as a curfew limited to three the number of people who might gather in the streets at night. The event steered clear of repression due to the support of Father Libio Gorza, a progressive priest who promoted it as a church-based action. From this point onwards, Jorge Orta made public spaces the favourite arena for the realisation and display of his art. At this time, he also introduced Video Art in Rosario by setting up the first video lab, and his work *Crónica Gráfica* (*Graphic Chronicle*) was selected to represent Argentina in the 1982 edition of the Paris Biennale by critic Guillermo Whitelaw.

Orta's second public projection, *Testigos Blancos* (*White Witnesses*), also took place in a Rosario square in 1982. It consisted of an impromptu installation of handmade crosses built with old clothes and puppets disposed around a central bonfire. The performance took the public and the authorities by surprise. Given the time-based and ephemeral nature of such work, the gathering of remnants became crucial. Orta recorded the action on video, as well as making a number of wooden boxes to contain collected ashes, soil and fragments of the sculptural elements. The reliquary nature of the boxes, with glass fronts allowing for closer inspection of the contents, translated into sculptures that evoked the tragic pressures of an historical moment.

During the following years and prior to his departure from Argentina in 1984, Jorge Orta continued exhibiting prints, woodcuts, engravings and paintings in galleries such as the Buonarroti Gallery and the Galería Krass in Rosario and making public installations and performative actions outside the gallery space. In *Arte Portable* (*Wearable Art*), of 1983, he employed the format of a fashion show to display politically charged images silkscreened on garments designed by stylist Graciela Vrecht. By showing the works on

models' bodies, the controversial imagery printed on the dresses took on the appearance of innocent *prêt à porter*. This single event precedes the public works made with garments that Jorge Orta collaborated on with his partner Lucy, a trained fashion designer, whose main philosophy is based on the use of the body as a vehicle for communication of social and political issues.

Mail Art: an art from the base upward

In the late seventies, alongside artists Clemente Padín in Uruguay, Damaso Orgaz in Venezuela, Edgardo Vigo and Graciela Marx in Argentina, Orta joined a network strategy for communication and distribution of ideas through Mail Art that proliferated throughout Latin America. They believed in "an art from the base upward, without artists", which embraced a critique of society, politics and the very conservative and commercial face of the art world.⁸

Mail Art was one of the main modes of widespread distribution of visual arts in the 1970s and early 1980s, and was eagerly employed in Latin America. In the context of political repression, it served artists to create ubiquitous platforms to disseminate messages otherwise blocked by State controlled circuits such as the printed media. Orta was no exception: at that time he also conceived conceptual works encompassing *Concierto por Teléfono* (*Telephone Concert*)—a music recording distributed by arbitrarily choosing numbers from the phone book to defy social isolation and the lack of interest in culture—and *El Globero* (*The Balloon Seller*) which consisted of costumes made with helium filled balloons containing written messages that were freely released in the air. The works were made collectively, transgressing the isolation promoted by the regime and the fear of persecution. For some of these projects he worked in collaboration with

Edgardo Vigo, one of the strongest figures of conceptualism in Argentina. With Vigo and other international artists Orta participated in the creation of rubber stamps editions to print images for distribution via the postal services. In 1984 Orta organised the First International Mail Art Seminar of at the Centro Cultural Bernardino Rivadavia in Rosario and founded, with Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín, the Latin American Association of Mail Art.

The dissemination strategies employed in these initiatives are clear precursors of current global projects made for the internet. The images that Orta produced at the time included children's faces symbolising social injustice; tied hands and feet, remnants of bodies, making reference to the disappearances in Argentina. Such iconography, its use of colour and graphic composition is constant in Orta's works to date. Paramount in his practice is that although materials and techniques might have evolved through time, the concepts and the ethical intentions of the imagery are a continuum which spans from the early years in Argentina to the latest works of Studio Orta made in collaboration with his partner, Lucy, and an increasing number of project associates.

Among the most remarkable works of Orta's Argentine period is a participative printmaking project held at Galería Miró, Rosario, in 1981. *Grabado en Cinta Continua* (*Continuous Print Roll*) consisted of a printing carousel with two hundred images engraved on a roll, which allowed participants to print and cut off individual fragments and appropriate an original art work. Once printed, the images could be taken away as if they were freshly baked bread rolls from the oven. The event was framed by a highly politicised text attacking the economic system of the art market and the fetish value of art objects. An excerpt reads: "to counterbalance the degradation in the investors market imposed by the work of art through the distribution of the multi edition of print works. To abolish the fetish value of the object, the participatory action (... consists of) a physical intervention to produce a unique work that will dissolve by means of the public will... those interested in 'acquiring' a work will have to cut it off the roll." This action reminds other iconic examples of artists attempts to promote a democratic consumption of art, such as Felix Gonzalez Torres' free editions of prints and candies piled up in galleries and offered to the public, and Victor Grippo's clay oven to bake bread for the public, dismantled by the police in a Buenos Aires public square in 1973.

Light Works selected chronology

The last piece Orta made in Argentina was while teaching at the Rosario Faculty of Arts in 1984. *Fusión de Sangre Latinoamericana* (*Latin American blood fusion*) was a performative action consisting of the drawing of blood from the participants to the International Mail Art Seminar at the Bernardino Rivadavia Cultural Center. The blood of all seminar delegates was mixed and incorporated



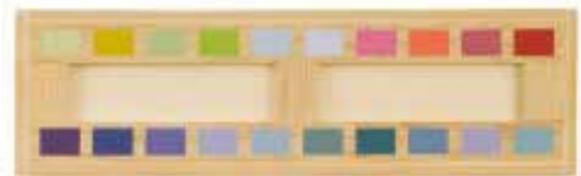
Relicarios, 1982
Ash, remains of Testigos performance, fragments of newspapers, photographs, textiles
170 x 170 x 40 cm
Centre de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires

Testigos, 1982-2008
Public installation
Plaza Santa Cruz Rosario, Argentina

Crónica Gráfica, 1982
Video performance
XII Biennale de Paris, France / Bernardino Rivadavia centro culturel, Rosario, Argentina



Pinturas Contextuales, 1976–1980
Mixed media
40 x 30 cm



Pintura por metro, 1976–1980
20 painted canvases in wooden crate
23 x 25 x 90 cm

Gama, colores contextuales, 1976–1980
Paint samples, pharmaceutical bottles, wooden vitrine
90 x 90 x 8 cm

into an artwork as a symbolic ritual of brotherhood in the face of the indifference of Latin American people to their closest neighbours and as an energetic tribute to life. As a result of the piece Orta was reprimanded by the Faculty management who considered the action inappropriate by an acting professor. Frustrated and exhausted by the lack of imagination of the newly installed democratic government, and prompted by a French government grant, Jorge Orta decided to leave Argentina to arrive in Paris in 1984.

With the emergence of the Paris-based FIAC (Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain) art fair, the articulation of the French art market helped to emphasise commercial and individual production, particularly painting. In this environment, not favourable to the production of immaterial actions, Orta was faced with the difficulty of continuing his experimental work done in Argentina. This circumstance, however, prompted him to explore the possibility of employing light to express his interest in public art in the new environment. At that time he began researching for a PhD at La Sorbonne University and becoming simultaneously involved in the production of the PAE 2500 *image canons* developed by the light engineer Léon Miquel, which helped him focus on the exploration of the use of light as a prime material for the production of large-scale works. The technique that he invented for projection of large-scale long-distance light beams was to use heat resistant image projection plates that were famously pioneered by Jean-Michel Jarre in Houston, Texas in 1986 during his international tour of light and sound mega concerts. Orta's silkscreen print studio in the Quai de Seine was the laboratory where he developed the procedure to print epoxy-based enamel images onto ceramic glass—which could withstand the high temperatures of the PAE's concentrated light beams. The PAE 2500 projectors have a light output of 2,500–5,000 watts each and can project images up to 5,000 square metres over a distance of hundreds of metres.

But in 1991 disaster struck Jorge Orta with the sudden burning of his newly renovated warehouse studio, on Canal de l'Ourc near La Villette district. This marked the beginning of a period of scarcity and prompted a change of direction in his career. With the studio—also his home—all his possessions burned down, including his entire art production, the automatic silkscreen machines, personal records, his library and his photo and video archives. In the midst of a new global economic crisis prompted by the first Gulf War and faced with a lack of materials, references and working space, Orta began the reconstruction of a fundamental part of his artistic endeavour by resorting to the planetary alphabet in a small temporary studio in Rue Brancion. At the same time, he met English born artist Lucy Jenkinson with whom he began to develop art projects in association. The encounter meant a shift in Jorge's practice.

After ten years of waiting Jorge Orta was finally able to employ the PAE image cannon for his own research purposes and began using it as a 'paintbrush', painting with light in public spaces. His first large-scale light projection was *Poème Infographique*, produced in 1991 for the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris in the context of the "Rencontres d'Art Electronique". The artist developed images that would decompose and metamorphose in dialogue with the industrial and hard edge architecture of Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers' building. During a period when Macintosh was developing software to produce the first computer generated images, Orta's images for *Poème Infographique* were hand-drawn in the studio, digitised using the first computer-aided design programmes and then silkscreen printed onto the ceramic glass plates.

Imprints on the Andes, 1992

Following a second light projection series in 1992 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and the Chartres Museum, Jorge and Lucy alongside Claude Namer embarked in the most ambitious and emblematic *Light Work: Imprints on the Andes* a work in chapters that began in the millenary city of Cuzco, Peru, site of the Inca Empire. The project included an expedition across the Andes Mountain range, *Sacsayhuamán*—the Inca fortress—culminating in the magnificent Machu Pichu citadel, one of the most impressive archaeological enclaves of pre-Columbian America. During the projections Orta's symbols bathed with their colourful gleam the ancient sacred mountains and temples before the eyes of two-hundred thousand people, as a symbolic counter-celebration of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the Americas in 1492. *Imprints on the Andes* remains the beacon piece of all Light Works made by Lucy+Jorge Orta, due both to its conceptual impact and technical complexity.

The local context for this monumental work was the celebration in Peru of Indigenous America, organised by aboriginal communities to challenge the commemoration of the discovery of America by Columbus as an act of resistance. The event, a reunion of the Inca with 200,000 indigenous people in the day of *Inti Raymi* marked the beginning of winter and the raising of the Pleiades in the southern skies.⁹ During *Inti Raymi* the people of the Andes enthrone their leader, the Inca, in a large ceremony held at the Inca fortress—the pukara—of *Sacsayhuamán* a place of high historical connotations as it was built in the sixteenth century by the Inca Manko to resist the invasion of the Spanish *conquistadores*.¹⁰ In spite of the establishment of Catholicism as the official religion and the secular tendencies of the political classes, the ancestral law of the Inca is maintained year after year, as a display of the people's own sense of democracy.

From a logistic viewpoint the preparation of the sequence of projections entailed numerous difficulties and risks. The socio-



Alfabeto planetario, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
146 x 228 cm

X Escuadra equinoccial, vapor de piedra, P.N., 1990
Acrylic on canvas
130 x 90 cm



Poema naufragado, 1981
Remains of boat, drift wood,
acrylic Gamas paint
30 x 30 x 10 cm

Poema erosionado, 1981
Branches, acrylic Gamas paint
30 x 30 x 10 cm



De-espalda, 1982–2009
Video performance with meat hooks

political climate of President Alberto Fujimori's Peru was tense due to the presence of guerrilla groups in the country and the recent coup d'état. A week before the expedition was scheduled to depart France, the entire team of technicians resigned due to safety issues posed by the state of emergency, which led to the need to assemble another team in a matter of days. Once in Lima, remaining defiant of official advice, the Ortas set out to Cuzco in an operation that might have seemed out of Werner Herzog's epic film *Fitzcarraldo*. With the help of traditional Andean carriers the team transported the heavy equipment, consisting of projection canons and oversize electricity generators—which amounted to one tonne in weight—through narrow mountain paths from the city of Cuzco to Machu Picchu, relaying entirely on manpower.

Imprints on the Andes remains the Orta's most emblematic *Light Work* despite being the most technically challenging and financially costly. It is also their favourite because of the ideological and emotional impact the work had for both artists and audiences. The images, partly extracted from *The Book of the Inca*—a visual compendium of the massacres and tortures suffered by the Incas in the hands of the Spanish *conquistadores*—ran their mythical power over the spectacular mountain range at over 3,000 metres above sea level. Despite the work being shown in isolated sites, an intelligently devised press campaign led to a considerable coverage, notably in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, which proudly announced it as "a French expedition". This naturally helped the project by making it an international piece of news, followed by headlines in major newspapers and glossy magazines across the world. However, in Machu Picchu the projections acquired a different meaning: although mainly illiterate, the Andean audiences of the work could readily identify with the use of signs and pictograms already present in their iconographic tradition. The codified language made of symbols projected over their sacred mountains connected the local audiences to their past and present condition without mediation. Furthermore, the projection was enriched by local traditions in the framework of *Inti Raymi*. During the festival, the Inca reproduce ancient costumes made of gold by employing metallic paper to reflect the sun and thus represent their God—*Inti*. For the crowning of the Inca, an ordinary citizen is chosen among the people to be the leader of the solar year. Upon the ceremony, he delivers a speech containing guidance for the times ahead to a crowd of thousands.

The main achievement of *Imprints on the Andes* was undoubtedly that the artists' work could, in this environment, revitalise energies and expressions through the values attributed to materials in an alchemic ritual. The clear relation between materials, symbol and its representation made by the audiences in Machu Picchu was a true revelation to Lucy and Jorge. The reception of this piece of contemporary art was clearly more inclusive than if presented to an art educated European public who would have needed interpretative tools to de-codify its meaning.

The Cry from the Earth, 1994

Following the international media attention of *Imprints on the Andes*, Lucy+Jorge Orta were invited to produce a similar piece in Japan, by the Asahi television company. *The Cry from the Earth*, sponsored by NEC, was part of a larger commission of artists including Cai Guo-Qiang, to create unique works, using innovative technologies and of a large-scale that would be broadcast on Japanese television during the peak viewing time on New Year's evening.

Preparations for the work included a several week expedition trek across Japan, visiting sites as remote as the Okinwa islands, the sacred temples of Kyoto, and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, to source natural and man-made symbols that would form the iconographic basis of the *Light Work*. As a constant methodology, the symbols for each project are sourced from the history and the particular natural environment or anthropological imprints of each site. In Japan, the chosen location was the largest volcano in activity in the world. The crater of Mount Aso volcano is several kilometres wide and visitors to the volcano range are forced to shelter against the eruptions and the intermittent sulphurous rain in 'volcano bunkers'. The research process involved the sketching of the source imagery on paper scrolls in calligraphic ink. The designs of natural forms like leaves, shells and stones unfolded into abstracted ideograms, providing a new sign system generated by and combination of intuition and constructive methodology, and originated in nature. The resulting ideograms were added to the planetary alphabet that Jorge began in the early 1970s.

The distinctive quality of the *The Cry from the Earth* is that for the first time the *Light Works* correlated sound and image. Using the UPIC computer music system invented by Iannis Xenakis in 1950 and built in the French CEMAMU research centre in 1976, the artists' recorded sounds of the eruptions and volcanic activity were transformed into images, likewise the hand-drawn pictograms could become sounds. Hence, their musical notation is linked intrinsically to the morphology of images, and *vice versa*. Developed in six months, the Aso project also involved the latest in NEC technology, including filming from radio controlled helicopters. However, despite the availability of means, the projections had to be cancelled three times due to the instability of the volcano. When finally underway, the stunning effect of the projections over the sulphur clouds managed to strike a chord in the country's imagination as they related conceptually to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the bombings, the imagery recalled the emissions of the nuclear explosions when broadcasted to 30 million Japanese homes. Moreover, the allusion to atomic power was made more poignant by Chirac's controversial announcement of the re-launching of the atomic tests in the Pacific region.

This luminographic work, alongside those made later for the cathedrals, one ancient and one contemporary *Chartres, Sacred Light*, 1994, and *Evry, Crossroads*, 1996, employed the graphic writing of music. Orta's generation of sound from visual elements takes inspiration from the electro-acoustic experimental music of the 1950s and 60s, which explored the writing of scores based on codified imagery.¹¹ According to a notation system designed by the artist, instruments—both electro-acoustic and analogue—play the codified images, which result in the generation of coloured light filters and sound effects determined by a strict numbering system and time code. As a matrix of the *Light Works*, the Orta notation scores became hand printed limited editions and sometimes unique works that act as mementos of how the works were conceived and executed.

Light Messenger and Woven Light, 1995

Jorge Orta's lifetime work was honoured at the XLVI Venice Biennale of 1995, where he was invited to represent Argentina with his piece *Light Messenger*. Given that Argentina had lost its national pavilion during the 1980s due to the lack of interest in contemporary art at the time of the dictatorship, Jorge was left with little opportunity to exhibit work, and so for this occasion he created a spectacular *Light Works* for the Venetian Palaces and churches, from a Venetian cargo boat navigating the Grand Canal. The event lasted three nights, employing ephemeral light graffiti including drawings from workshops conducted by Lucy+Jorge Orta with underprivileged communities in South America and homeless youth groups in France. Using water as a support to reflect images, the angle of projection changed. The coloured lights projected from the surface of the water onto the building transmitted the vibrating effect from the movement of the waves, mirroring the canal's activities onto the architecture. As the festivities of the Biennale inauguration were taking place inside the palaces, the giant graffiti imprinted themselves momentarily onto the gleeful faces, ironically printing them momentarily with images produced by those excluded from the system. Parallel to the evening's *Light Works*, Lucy Orta conducted one of her iconic *Nexus Architecture* interventions.¹² Rallying support from the architecture students at the University luav of Venice, the human chain linked through the bright yellow and purple suits snaked the Biennale circuit, both communicating through distributed tracts and images, signs and texts silkscreen-printed onto the garments duplicating those of the projections. Devoid of a fixed place to demonstrate their work, the artists invaded the public space, strategically deploying all means of communication.

But in the mid-1990s Studio Orta's ongoing interest in art's relation to social communication and the artists' view of their role as a mediator reached a break point. The work the *The Cry from the Earth* for the Mount Aso volcano highlighted the incapacity of individual artists to effectively provide a clear concept at such

a gigantic scale. Furthermore, the great input needed in such processes, with a personal involvement of a minimum of six months to up to two years made it all too time consuming. This brought about a deep enquiry into the contradictory nature of the Light Works, which had a tendency to be concentrated in locations with greater financial resources, with the wish to create works with minimum resources and a greater investment on content to reach more disadvantaged audiences. The realisation that the large-scale, several thousand dollar projects were distorting the nature of their interest in participation and the challenging of notions of authorship, led the artists to devote the next ten years to a collaborative global project: *The Gift—Life Nexus*.

From Light to Life

The Gift—Life Nexus, began in 1996 as a multidisciplinary project that expanded to 45 cities in a decade. With *Life Nexus Studio* Orta began to build a discourse of solidarity and raise awareness on organ donation with the symbol of the heart at its core, as an accessible referent. The project involved collaborations with scientists, philosophers and medical doctors as well as musicians, visual artists, ceramicists, choreographers, dancers and ordinary citizens. Conceptually, it proclaimed respect for life and formally it was constructed as an Opera in acts, giving birth to a number of related participatory projects that acted as fragments of a larger corpus to be shaped through time. The roots of *Life Nexus* are in the viral methodologies that artists in Rosario and the rest of South America were proclaiming in the 1970s and 80s. The model was established as self-financed, low cost and large impact projects done with the progressive addition of people and participation from different artists, collectives and individuals without the support of the gallery system. The principal output consisted of mountains of hearts, hand sculpted or cast in different materials by hundreds of participants in locations around Europe, North and South America employing materials representative of those cultures. Without a focus on the place of art in the global economy, the

OPERA.tion Life Nexus, act VI—Battement des Grands Jours, 2001
Palais de Tau / Reims Cathedral, France



chapters of *Life Nexus* constituted small-scale initiatives that would become the cogs of a larger wheel.

At the same time, the studio continued to create and produce one or two Light Works a year, but they became less central to Lucy+Jorge's practice, or they involved collaborations which stimulated or led to new participative works.

On the occasion of *OPERA.tion Nexo Corazón, act V*, a *Light Work* in Mexico City was produced in 2001. This work involved a series of workshops with communities living and working around the city centre district, where crime is at its highest density. To create the imagery for the projections Lucy+Jorge worked with street children, prostitutes, vendors and street painters—namely the infamous Vichis family of *ex-voto* painters—prior to the project, and took back the drawings and paintings to their Paris studio to be re-worked into image projection plates. They also collaborated closely with composer Pierre Henry, to create a music score and urban soundscape for the central plaza of Mexico City, where thousands of Mexicans gathered for the evening events.

For *OPERA.tion Life Nexus, act VIII* in the Saint Eustache Les Halles district of Paris, 2002, the luminographic work to celebrate the city's autumn music festival included the collaboration with composer and musician Simon Stockhausen, who played live on a stage suspended on scaffolding on the church while the moving projections glided over the facade and musicians.

OPERA.tion Life Nexus, act IX, Nancy, 2003, was one of the most participative Light Works. Conceived to mark the World Transplant Games it was generated by three complementary projects. First, the engagement of tens of thousands of students from 88 schools and their families to create a code of ethics for organ donation. This led to the production of drawings that were transformed into iconographic images for a Light Works projected on the buildings surrounding Stanislas Square. The third element was a sculpture made of bronze hearts sited at the Place de la République, which constitutes a perennial testimony of Lucy+Jorge's time-based interventions and community work.

In these instances, the Light Works became a cog in the wheel: a means to giving wider visibility to a larger idea rather than focusing on the final product of the projection itself.

Founding Utopia: *Escuela 21*

In 1997 Studio Orta was invited to participate in the Medellín Biennale, Colombia, to produce a work for the opening event. Due to the scarce resources available, the artists proposed the making and exhibition of clay hearts, but the curators were adamant that their participation includes a large-scale, "full impact" *Light Work*. But the Biennale did not count on resources



Escuela 21, 1997–2002
Construction of rural school in Palmichal, Medellín, Colombia
Collaboration with architect Juan David Chavez

Rive des Amériques, 1992
Musée de l'homme Paris, France



to produce such works. Given that the only available resource was the media, the artists decided to employ radio and TV networks during one week of the Biennale to talk to audiences about the work that they could not realise. In the given airtime, Jorge Orta would talk about the social dynamic of participation in art projects to move society from the base up. His newborn idea, *Escuela 21* was used as an example of a cooperative enterprise that would aim to provide basic services, such as school buildings, in deprived areas. Thanks to the media campaign, after the opening event university students, professors, architects and activists offered their help to continue working in collaboration. Coordinated by the local architect Juan David Chávez the group made possible the renovation and building of the first school in Palmichal. From that humble start, *Escuela 21* continues as an ongoing project designed to support education through cooperative fundraising by building schools in remote areas of South America.

Since the end of the first part of *The Gift—Life Nexus*, undertaken from 1996 to 2006, Lucy+Jorge's most recent works have focused on global issues. Encompassing food and water shortages, migration and borders, climate change and biodiversity, their more recent works address the commonality of contemporary concerns, which defy localised approaches. In light of these developments, it becomes highly meaningful to look at the political complexity of the planetary alphabet when considering Lucy+Jorge Orta's recent work on Antarctica presented at the Hangar Bicocca, Milan in April 2008 and Galleria Continua/Le Moulin, Paris in June 2008. The work employs a repertoire of universal symbols and the flags of all nations to represent humankind and sites them in a geographical space without borders.

Through their focus on the concepts of migration, food and water wastage, the imminence of climate change or the need to conserve our natural environment, Studio Orta navigates a distinctive artistic path, where the ethic and the aesthetic inherent in art and life have no borders.

1. Gyula Kosice was founding member of Movimiento Madí in Buenos Aires in 1944.
2. Julio Le Parc in conversation with the author in Zurich on June 4, 2005.
3. Fontana, Lucio, White Manifesto: We are Continuing the Evolution of Art, Buenos Aires, 1946
4. In 1922 László Moholy-Nagy employed light and sound in his 'Licht-Raum Modulator' sculpture
5. Nicknamed La Papesse de l'Art Abstrait, Denise René was committed to the promotion of abstract art since the 1940s. A decade later she helped launch Kineticism through her gallery.
6. Through the 1960s, GRAV articulated a thorough theoretical corpus in the form of manifestos among which the seminal No More Mystifications written in 1961 and distributed in the form of pamphlets in the Paris Biennale that same year. The manifesto defined with great clarity the main concerns of the group: "...We want to develop in the spectator a powerful ability to perceive and take action. A spectator aware of his power to take action and tired of so many abuses and mystifications will be able to create the true 'revolution in art'. He will put into practice the slogans:

It is forbidden not to participate
It is forbidden not to touch
It is forbidden not to break."

7. The years of the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983) when State terrorism was responsible for the disappearance and illegal detention of over thirty thousand citizens.
8. Orta, Jorge in interview with Janna Graham, Discussion: Participation, Becoming, Action. Lucy+Jorge Orta, an introduction to collaborative practices. Pattern Book, Black Dog Publishing, Ed. By Paula Orrell
9. Andean people's festival of the sun in June 24th, marking the beginning of the winter solstice.
10. Andean eagle in Quechua language.
11. Musical graphic notation—symbols first began to appear in the works of avant-garde composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Krzysztof Penderecki, as well as the works of experimental composers such as John Cage and Earle Brown.
12. Nexus Architecture interventions, are a symbolic action consisting of a chain of participants wearing overalls created by the artist and joined through a series of fabric tubes and zippers, representing the social link.