

**Title, Collective Intelligence: The Work of Lucy Orta**

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**First transcript, final essay published in 2003**

**Lucy Orta, Phaidon Press UK pgs 8-29 ISBN 0-7148-4300-8**

**INTRODUCTION**

'We have learned to fly in the air like birds and to swim in the sea like fish, but we have still not learnt the simple art of living together like brothers.' These words, taken from a speech by Martin Luther King, were serigraphed onto one of the many garments constructed by Lucy Orta. On another, we find the affirmation 'Me, I've got a lot to say', borrowed from a participant in her Shelter Workshop of 1995. With these phrases we can begin an initial analysis of the themes underlying the work of an artist who has sought to create connections, stimulate contacts and institute collective effort through her work. Orta's art is often the result of collaborations with specialists and others, and always seeks to underline the importance played by the social in our lives. This is based on the conviction that each of us, even the most marginalized, has 'a lot to say'.

Orta was born and studied in England, but her first artistic interventions took place in France, where she now lives. Her earliest works emerged between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, when the Cold War was coming to an end. Gorbachev, who had attempted to introduce a democratic model in the Soviet Union, would soon be overturned by his own reforms, and the fall of the Berlin Wall became the symbol of unstoppable change. But the 'victory' of the West, and of its economic model, had by no means solved all of society's problems, and the goal of becoming competitive in terms of production often had as its consequence (or maybe its premise) the abandonment of social guarantees. This single model has given a free hand to those who, through an aggressive economic plan, wish to impose their own paradigm of development, which often simply represents a more efficient model of exploitation. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Gulf War ushered to a close a period of incredible economic euphoria and brought to the surface the fragility and precariousness of an economic and cultural system no longer threatened by political uncertainty or by possible alternative systems of power.

These great events, paired with experiences in the field of political activism and her marriage to the South American artist Jorge Orta in the early 1990s, are the background against which to view Orta's work, along with other elements that contributed to her development and maturation. All of her works seek to investigate the complexity of the present reality, to bring to light some of the harsher, internal contradictions in contemporary society, to analyze its problems and question stereotyped social conventions. Orta operates on a plane where ethics and aesthetics find themselves sharing the same territory. And the rigid division separating these disciplines is not the only one to be called into question in her practice: fashion, design, architecture, theatre, urban planning and the visual arts are all summoned simultaneously. In each work we find the presence of a well-blended mixture of elements, thus stimulating an analysis of language and of the semantic borders between disciplines. Even our judgment of these works cannot rest on the usual parameters or the normal comforting boundaries.

Orta's training as a fashion/textile designer naturally linked her first works to that second removable and transformable skin – clothing. Clothing is a film; it is the surface that people see and touch. It is a means of relating to and communicating with others; it is the 'face' we present to the outside world, our personality. At the same time, it is protection, it is stability, it is safety. Obviously, Orta's work does not simply constitute items of clothing; rather it becomes a series of transformable 'refuges', collective garments, displays used to publicize issues and pose questions. Her clothing series are therefore portable architectures, wearable objects located midway between social commitment and the post-atomic science-fiction imagination.

Orta's work draws the spectator's attention not only to the object but above all, to the network of internal and external relationships and references of which her installation-performances consist. They speak of a lack of social involvement and a sense of solitude, and, at the same time – going back to the phrase, 'I've got a lot to say' – the need to listen to each single voice as an individual expression, obviating the hegemony of slogans, ideologies and homologation. Along with the serious, unresolved problems that affect the whole planet, most of us deal each day with individual uncertainty and insecurity, problems that cannot be lumped together and that cannot therefore be ascribed to a homogeneous whole or reduced to a single point of view. The search for an all-satisfying solution seems utopian, and the awareness of this is reflected in a general lack of faith in politics. This lack of faith leads us to deny the poverty and marginalization that we see around us. Increasingly in big cities extreme wealth and extreme poverty accumulate in the same territory. It is a phenomenon that is more evident in the so-called Third World, but that has become endemic even in the West. Big cities are being transformed into great concentrations of solitude and marginalization, and the extent to which individuals personally suffer from this is the object of investigation and at the same time the active subject behind Orta's projects.

Orta seeks to overturn the methods and procedures of our consumer society and the images that deny an identity to those who do not consume and cannot identify with the models proposed through the advertisement of merchandise. In this way, she opposes that 'unwritten' rule of behaviour according to which those who are unable to buy must make themselves as invisible as possible. With her artworks, she intervenes to restore visibility to that which is invisible, to bring attention to people, phenomena and things that are not usually deemed to possess the necessary appeal to become images: the homeless, political refugees, or (in later works) discarded food stuffs collected in city markets and recycled.

What Orta proposes is therefore a form of re-socialization that acts on various levels. One of her collections entitled *Refuge Wear* bears the words: 'living without a shelter for prolonged periods rapidly destroys physical and moral health.'<sup>1</sup> The lack of adequate sleep increases stress, weakens the immune system and accelerates the loss of identity and desocialization',<sup>1</sup> a sort of manifesto for her work. These garments/architectures are not only covered with such texts, but are also used as a new type of 'itinerant painting', bearing, for example, a compass and a map of Rwanda, a pair of begging hands or stylized drawings. The images serigraphed onto these garments/houses are like tattoos: they express ideas, sentiments, identity, values, but they are always presented as a form of question.

Through Orta's works one discovers poverty and marginalization. At the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial in 1997, for example, she presented a piece in collaboration with the Usindiso Women's Shelter; in Paris, and subsequently New York, with the Salvation Army. These were works that underlined how the ability to obtain an identity is consequential on the re-elaboration and reinvention of garments given to poor people.

Orta's work, however, cannot be reduced to mere condemnation of the state of marginalization; most of it reflects situations that involve us all. Solitude and isolation affect everyone directly, and Orta's attempt at resocialization is brought into practice in works that aim to operate at a more general and symbolic level. In *70 x 7 The Meal 2*, for instance, people were invited to participate in a ritual lunch, which, since each invitee was called upon to involve seven more people, creates a sequence of connections with other individuals<sup>3</sup>.

Another common element in much of Orta's work is the centrality of the body, which of course, links us all. Her use of the body does not connect with artistic movements of the recent past; she does not focus attention on the body to push limits and sensations, but rather analyzes it in its vital processes, where survival and the capacity to communicate co-exist. Clothing and architecture are structures built around the body, and the body is also the

<sup>1</sup>Translated from Orta's original French: *Les séjours prolongés sans abris dégradent rapidement la santé physique et morale. Le temps de sommeil insuffisant majore le stress, affaiblit les défenses immunitaires et accélère la perte d'identité et la désocialisation.*

<sup>2</sup> *70 x 7 The Meal* was organized the first time, for 14 guests, at the Innsbruck's Kunstraum. The Orta's work was part of the show *The Invisible Touch* curated by Maia Damianovic, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> "*70 x 7* is a meal for seven guests, who in turn invite seven... *70 x 7* interprets the biblical signification meaning 'infinite' (*70 x 7*, Lc17,4) to create an original multiplication game for conviviality". Artist's statement, 2000.

protagonist in the works centred around food, which highlight the fact that this essential function can also be the basis for relationships. The body is not only understood as the measure of one's own space and world, but also as a fragile structure to be preserved in a great diversity of ways; the body is seen as both a producer of sensations and as a builder of relationships. Seen in this light, Orta's works are also about identity.

It is worth repeating that the ethical and conceptual aspects of Orta's work are never disconnected from the aesthetic ones; she is attentive to the external details as well as to the internal aspects of the objects to be exhibited/used. This characteristic is never missing even in the more concretely social works, nor in the workshops, where the freedom given to participants is essential to their successful operation. Orta is aware that the efficacy of interventions, above all their capacity for penetration into the collective imagination, is dependent on the images we create. Any uncertainty in this area would automatically lead to their defeat, not only with regard to the art world but more generally in relation to everyone who comes into contact with her work. All too often, intelligent and potentially interesting works of art come undone because of a lack of attention to these aspects, rendering their artistic/social functions completely redundant.

We can approach Orta's works through arranging them into a series of chapters or cycles to facilitate their further examination, but these are not meant to reflect actual internal divisions between them. Each theme is fluid, closely related to and in harmony with the others.

#### REFUGE WEAR AND BODY ARCHITECTURE

Refuge Wear was the first of Orta's works to become known in international artistic circles. The initial drawings for the series were made in 1992 and can be considered a response to the problems and suffering experienced during the Gulf War. The series was conceived in order to confront situations of discomfort and/or the lack of protection by social structures.

Refuge Wear is clothing that transforms textiles, fibres and fabric membranes into portable architectures. It is therefore at the intersection of dress and architecture – two different levels of contact that the body has with the outside. The first covers and stays in contact with our body and the second, more solid in structure, defines the place in which we live and spend most of their time, constituting our refuge. Refuge Wear takes on both of these tasks, affirming that our body is in complete and indispensable interaction with that which surrounds it. Dress and architecture are also the limits – psychological and structural – between the individual and society, between the personal and the public. Perhaps because these are limits that coincide in the life of the homeless, Orta makes these two layers of protection overlap, favouring an interchange of roles between dress and architecture.

The first work of this series is entitled *Habitent*. The word naturally calls to mind the idea of the habitat,<sup>4</sup> and these particular clothes can be considered habitats that travel along with those who wear them. The other versions of Refuge Wear have subtitles that usually denote specific possibilities for their application, and give some clue to the context in which they were originally presented: *Habit Bivouac*, *Osmosis with Nature*, *Mobile Cocoon*, *Ambulatory Survival Sac*, *Survival Sac with Water Reserve*. For example, *Survival Sac with Water Reserve* was made during the most intense phase of the crisis in Rwanda. Following this, Orta created a version with the welcoming of Kurdish refugees in mind, or, by equipping these structures with sacs for water reserves or medicine, she created prototypes especially for the victims of natural disasters like the earthquake in Kobe.

A fundamental role is given to the pockets and pouches that enrich the various versions of this work, elements that personalize the use and specific function of each version of Refuge Wear. As the artist herself explains: *La poche, la pochette, le sac, dans leurs diverses formes, sont des appendices qui délimitent la personnalité de chaque abri et donc de l'individu qui l'occupe. Ces poches peuvent être transparentes, elles sont souvent remplies d'objets de*

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<sup>4</sup> But also the idea of habit: 'Habitent: a portable habitat that provide minimum personal confort and mobility for nomadic populations. The habit, a monk's gown implies a kind of uniform for meditation and spiritual refuge; "in-habitent" suggests human presence as an occupant for dwelling.' Transcription of the lecture by Lucy Orta published in *La Generazione delle immagini 7*, curated by Roberto Pinto *Tales of Identity*, Edizioni Comune di Milano, 2002, pp.136–67.

réflexion pour méditer. Elles peuvent s'ouvrir de l'intérieur, elles contiennent alors des objets personnels pour l'usage quotidien. Elles se détachent et se plient d'après les instructions sérigraphiées sur le tissu, et changent de forme et de fonction selon les besoins: transporter de l'eau ou des marchandises, abriter un homme, habiller un corps ... Ces poches sont en même temps un sac de rangement et un emballage du "Vêtement-Refuge"<sup>5</sup> Refuge Wear is therefore a truly personalized environment that can be transformed according to demands, needs and situations. Its value, once again, is in its symbolic and utopian capabilities.

The familiarity with the world of fashion visible in this series can also be found in many of Orta's subsequent pieces. A founder member of the Paris Fashion House – a group of designers and artists interested in creating links between experimental design and fabric research – she has a growing interest in creating new fabrics and has studied alternative uses for existing ones. Even with her numerous collaborations in the fashion world, however, Orta has never had the desire to be totally absorbed by it. Often, she has found this environment too limiting, alien to the social and poetic meanings towards which her work has tended.<sup>6</sup> Above all else, Orta has always tried to dedicate herself completely to the invention and creation of pilot projects or unique pieces, without having to justify them against the specific demands of the fashion industry.<sup>7</sup>

From her initial training, a taste for seeking out new materials remains. This experimentation often becomes itself the bearer of meaning: 'Materials that have a microporous membrane coating are of particular interest as they attempt to mimic certain characteristics of the skin, such as the transfer of body humidity from the interior to the exterior. This micro-process is fundamental to our well being and, even though the viewer may be unaware, it's part of the poetry of the object.<sup>8</sup> The process of fabrication reflects the concepts that unify the work. Like our body, the material is in complete contact with that which surrounds it. The work as a whole also reflects the capacity for interchange between function and metaphor. 'Thermochromic-coated fabrics used for Cocoon with Detachable Baby Carrier change colour with temperature fluctuations enabling the mother "unit" to react and control climatic variations.'<sup>9</sup> The fabrics are organic, in order to conserve contact with nature, but they are also as tough as their function requires. The profound reflection on and search for materials also extends to colours. These have a highly important function; Orta always chooses vibrant colours in order to increase the visibility of those who wear them. They can therefore be considered like spotlights pointed on people in order magnetically to attract the viewer's gaze.

Another element that becomes immediately evident is the transportability and multi-functionality of these clothes/architectures, which underlines how our society, based on computer connections and virtual reality, is completely borderless. The notion of territory and stability has been taken over by a concept of the nomadic that works on various economic and geographic levels. There is the touristic nomadism of capital, but also the shifting of masses of people from the country to the city and from the south to the north. We have arrived at a condition in which territory has become global, and nomadism has taken the place of rootedness.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1993 Orta has been creating Refuge Wear City Appearances, a series of happenings in which Refuge Wear is shown and used in public situations. Squats, railway stations and

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Orta, interviewed by Valérie Guillaume, *Art Press*, special issue, October 1997

<sup>6</sup> See Andrew Bolton, interview with Lucy Orta, *The Supermodern Wardrobe*, V&A Publications, London, 2002, p.133: 'In the early 1990s, I was completely disillusioned with fashion and its blatant consumerism. As a result, I installed *Refuge Wear* under the Louvre Pyramid during Paris Fashion Week. I chose the Vivienne Westwood show not only because she is a true innovator, but also because she was connected to the experimental art scene of the 1970s. Since then, a new generation of designers has emerged and I now enjoy working within the fashion system. I try to question fashion, to go beyond fashion – not its functional aspects but its social and poetic aspects.'

<sup>7</sup> It would be worthwhile to conduct a specific study on the effect that Orta's work has had on the fashion world – always hungry for stylistic and innovative ideas – especially in the field of sportswear.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Bolton, op cit, p. 133

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 133

<sup>10</sup> Numerous sociological texts on this subject that have been published over the last few years, an example being Zygmunt Bauman's *The Individualized Society*, Politi Press, Cambridge 2001, where he writes: 'The new global power structure is governed by the contrast between the notion of mobility and the notion of stasis, contingency and routine, rarity and density of conditionings. It is as if the long historic period begun with the triumph of the notion of resting in one place over the nomadic is reaching a conclusion. Globalization can be defined in many ways, but the concept of the "vendetta of the nomads" is rather good if not better than others.'

housing estates become spaces for interventions, bringing to light situations of discomfort removed from their usual context. Establishing contact with reality, and presenting her work in the midst of that reality, is one of the fundamental veins of Orta's research. Her interventions have the objective of reconnecting private and public, artistic and real spaces, art and life, never choosing nor abandoning either environment, but acting as a bridge between the two. In analyzing context and social dynamics, Orta has created an extraordinary laboratory that can be situated in the white cube of the gallery or museum, but where 'real' experimentation in an everyday context is even more important.

#### COLLECTIVE WEAR

Since 1994 (the year Orta met Paul Virilio), the artist's interest has been moving from individual space to the shared environment with the Collective Wear series, shown for the first time at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. This shift is indicative of Orta's growing interest in the collective in general, in mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, in the models of collective interaction that go from the microcosm of the small community to the macrocosm of a planet governed by politico-economic and environmental laws. Orta's research on Refuge Wear continued until 1996, when its more insular theme was overtaken by the need to concentrate on constructing these plural contacts and connections.

Collective Wear reminds us that we need other people in order to construct our own refuge; we need contact with the bodies of others. It affirms that man, like other social animals, owes his survival to the collective.<sup>11</sup> But if on the one hand it seems that Orta is drawing attention to a primary animal instinct, on the other she is affirming that we need to tap all our rational resources in order to respond to the emergencies towards which we are headed. We live in a world in which ecological balance is under great strain and only by planning a strategy and common rules, valid for all nations and populations of the world, can we hope to avoid a crisis from which it might be difficult to escape.

The passage from the single to the collective also involved the shifting of the intervention from the individual to the more generic, which introduced performative and theatrical elements. This evolution allows us to read Orta's work not only as concrete responses to unresolved social problems, but also in an intrinsically prophetic light,<sup>12</sup> where a typically 'artistic' capacity to investigate and reveal the hidden is favoured over concrete solutions. This process becomes gradually more evident throughout the development of her work, as can be noted in 70 x 7 The Meal and Nexus Architecture

#### FROM NEXUS TO MODULAR ARCHITECTURE

Nexus Architecture is perhaps Orta's most famous project and in many regards the most representative of her work. This piece is composed of a series of uniforms, similar to those worn by industrial workers, or to the white uniforms worn by no-global activists during recent protests. Their principal characteristic is that each can be connected to the next in such a way as to create a long snake of people, united by a kind of gigantic umbilical cord that is attached with a zipper to the belly of one uniform and clasped to the posterior section of the next. It is an outfit/structure that can be infinitely extended, involving hundreds of people, or can be limited to just a few individuals.

Nexus Architecture has been repeated and reinvented many times, precisely because its meaning and results are always different depending on the people and places involved. The idea of the physical connection between people was employed in order to allude to religious links, sexuality, age, social status or, more frequently, to create a symbolic nexus of common intentions, mimicking the structure of computer networks such as Internet communities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> A concept explained by Paul Virilio in *Urban Armour in Lucy Orta's Refuge Wear*, Editions Jean Michel Place, Paris, 1996, p. 2/6: 'The survival of most animals depends on running with the pack. The concept of the pack is linked to animal nature. 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 tell 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.'

<sup>12</sup> 'There is a prophetic dimension in her work. The realistic aspect is less important than the prophetic aspect', Paul Virilio, op. cit., p. 4/6

<sup>13</sup> Studio Orta has recently created a website – [www.fluidarchitecture.net](http://www.fluidarchitecture.net) – not only as an information source but also as a further conceptual development of the intervention process. Besides videos and images of work under

The capacity of Nexus Architecture to transform itself and interact within different contexts – from Mexico City to New York to Sydney – brought about its inclusion in many solo and group shows and a number of biennials. Orta has also created specific versions for dancers in order to investigate the intrinsic choreographic possibilities in her work. Additionally, it has been used on ‘non-artistic’ occasions, at environmental demonstrations, for example, or during the Parisian anti-nuclear protest.

Nexus Architecture x 16 was exhibited in Venice as part of the show ‘On Board’, curated by Jérôme Sans during the Venice Biennial (1995), and part of a project that included Jorge Orta’s intervention for the ‘Argentinian Pavilion’.<sup>14</sup> Its staging at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 was perhaps more significant (at least in terms of the wide range of physical, emotional and cultural connections it created). On this occasion, Orta took on the role of co-coordinator for a work created in collaboration with thirteen women from the Usindiso Women’s Shelter, an organization that helps women from the countryside find the resources to live in the city. Together with these participants, she selected and bought hundreds of metres of Kanga fabric at a local market. Each woman involved, most of whom had never used a sewing machine before, was paid to construct a section of Nexus Architecture in a labour of co-creation that, over time, took on an ever more precise system of working practice. Once created, the clothes were used for a public intervention during the inauguration of the Biennial. The work’s performative aspect connected strongly with the city,<sup>15</sup> since the long human chain that had formed inside the local exhibition space reached the city’s outer streets, where participants spontaneously began to sing ‘God Bless Africa’, one of the songs outlawed during the recently overthrown apartheid regime.

More recently, Nexus Architecture has been created in versions where groups of children have participated as actors/models, protesting at the ‘World March Against Child Labour’ (Lyon, 1998). Another version, Nexus Architecture x 110, created especially for 110 children, was presented at Cholet in 2002.

A characteristic aspect of Nexus Architecture, present throughout Orta’s artistic production in many different forms, is its strong inclination towards the creation of a structure. In a sense this is a sort of ‘search for order’, but not for control – a concept that is often associated with order. Structure, with its evident and symbolic connective quality, highlights our intrinsic nature as social animals. It creates the possibility of building a physical connection between diverse individuals that gives them something in common. This search for order can, on the one hand, be a product of a classic aesthetic model of rationality, but on the other – apparently paradoxically – it can be read as a subversive act. Since today there is greater flexibility and an absence of rules – the only sure rule of the free market is that there are none – creating an organized chain of common interest becomes subversive and revolutionary.

Order, or, better yet, the dream of a modular architecture, rational and perfectly multipliable, also grips Orta’s imagination in Modular Architecture; this work was a commission by the Soirées Nomades at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain in Paris in 1996. In this case, she uses it in order to stretch the limits of a modular collective living space. Modular Architecture is a portable, nocturnal refuge that is collaboratively built by individuals whose sum is greater than their parts. During the day, each piece is completely autonomous and can be worn by anyone. At night the outfits transform themselves architecturally, according to the number, needs and characteristics of the project’s individual participants. For example one of the pieces, the Dome is composed of four demi-bodies with arm and hood appendages. A demi-body can detach from its structure to create a full entity.

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construction, it presents texts and transcripts of conferences as well as testimonials and forums on the problematics raised by Orta’s work and workshops.

<sup>14</sup> Since there was no Argentinian Pavilion, they made interventions in the city itself. Jorge Orta’s work, *Luminographic light Projections*, could be viewed at night, while Lucy Orta’s *Nexus Architecture x 16* was conducted by day in the squares and bridges of Venice.

<sup>15</sup> In *Lucy Orta, Process of Transformation*, Editions Jean Michel Place Paris, 1998, p. 37, Jen Budney writes, ‘In a city as devastated by poverty and crime as Johannesburg, this giant, indoor art exhibition based on ideas of multi-culturalism and post-colonialism, but marketed mainly to a (white) suburban middle-class, failed to draw the interest of any local community. Orta’s project brought questions of class into the Biennale as no other work did, asking: for whom is art, who does it represent, to whom does it speak and which audience does it benefit? Are there any more relevant projects for the communities of Johannesburg right now?’

Life Nexus Village Fête has similar characteristics.<sup>16</sup> Here, architecture is seen as a meeting point, as a collective project: 'The inter-connective dome structures form a temporary nomadic tent village and the pre-determined connective protocols allow for numerous configurations all articulating around a central hexagonal foyer, a meeting place for larger groups. The network of tubes and passages serves as arteries to the smaller domes, hubs for fête activities and vectors for dialogue and exchange. The villagers become active participants, not passive recipients of yet another art show.'<sup>17</sup>

An architectonic infrastructure for social spaces also plays a part in the series of works entitled *The Connector*<sup>18</sup>. Transformable sleeping bags, tents, ground sheets, rucksacks was used can be attach and detach to each other and forms the basis of a sort of mobile village. Here, independence and interdependence are equally important. In a statement about this work, Orta speaks of a 'rhizome-like architectural configuration'. The term 'rhizomatic' defines her collaborative approach, where the premise is to produce new configurations and developments of initial ideas and prototypes. The image of the rhizome could be seen as a model for all her work, and its social impact can be explained by borrowing this image of a root from which grow new roots and therefore new plants. It suggests a vision in which all vital manifestations are connected to one another but individual identity is preserved (as is the case with each new plant); a network of support in which every link, even the weakest, can serve to create new plants and flowers.

The contamination between art and architecture is not new in the history of art, but we can, at any rate, consider it as a recent rediscovery. In this area of investigation we can place the work of Dan Graham, *Atelier van Lieshout* or *Andrea Zittel*. However, Orta's work can best be compared to some of *Vito Acconci's* works like *House of Cars* (1983). What *Acconci* does with old cars – using each as a unit (halfway between clothing and house) in order to create connectable structures – Orta does with her avant-garde fabrics, from curtains to clothes. That which *Acconci* foretells in his work with cars, Orta brings to extreme consequences in her environmental works, to the point of displacing the romantic myth once constructed around cars as symbols of independence and freedom, and underlining their triumph over civility. After all, we are now forced to live in a world created more for cars than for man, where it is difficult to walk through the streets, interact with people and even breathe clean air.

If one wishes to continue along these lines, analogies can be drawn between *Acconci's* *Mobile Linear City* (1991) and Orta's *Modular Architecture* or *Life Nexus Village*. Both intend to marry public and private space, living space and the body, architecture and art; both speak of shelter and refuge. However, there are important characteristics that distinguish the two artists from each other. First is Orta's attention to technical aspects on the one side, and environmental ones on the other. This pushes her to choose totally different materials from those that might be selected by an American artist. Above all, in much of Orta's work collaboration becomes an integral part of the work. This is true of *Acconci* only on the level of production (both artists attribute their work to a team by signing it *Acconci Studio* and *Studio Orta* respectively). In Orta's case, it is also true on the level of functionality. This may be more evident in her work connected with food, but even her uniforms acquire meaning and take on a communicative charge with the participation of only a few individuals.

*Dans le même panier (All in One Basket)*

The daily practice of sitting down to a meal is surely the most personal action in which we take part socially. Almost every culture dedicates time to eating with friends and family. It is a ritual, and it is interesting to note how food, so important for survival, is placed within that ritual. The maternal aspect – the intimate act of caring for people and alleviating their hunger – co-exists with the collective aspect of sharing the same experience and sensations with others. In addition, food is often the best way to begin integrating and communicating with a culture different from one's own.

<sup>16</sup> Created for the first time for the public art show 'In the Midst of Things', Bournville Village Green, Birmingham, UK, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Lucy Orta, 'Life Nexus Village Fête', artist's statement, 1999.

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Dans le même panier (1997) was created in reaction to a television report in which French farmers were filmed dumping tons of fruit onto the streets during a protest demonstration against the European Community's agricultural policy. From this alarming episode, Orta made a more general reflection on the waste surrounding us daily, which has come to seem so 'normal' that we are no longer even aware of it. Perhaps in opposition to the shock tactics employed in the farmers' protest (and maybe even to the practice of sensationalism that has become the mainstream in contemporary art), Orta prepared an event that was low-key but profoundly allusive and efficient. She chose as a site for her work a familiar location, fitting to her scenario: the old marketplace of Les Halles in Paris. Once a week over a period of six months, Orta went to this market with a team of volunteers in order to collect fruit and vegetables that would otherwise have been discarded. This produce was brought to new life by being transformed into syrups, jams and preserves, stored in labeled and dated jars. These events were photographed and filmed on video, as well as interviews with the customers of Les Halles.

Each of these interviews tells us something important about our society, highlighting the diverse relationships that different people have with food. One woman declares: 'A full basket is enough for me for one week; if I took more it would only go to waste',<sup>19</sup> while a homeless person reveals a disturbing reality: 'Salvaging fruit, that's for rich people. You need a fridge to keep it in and an oven to cook it in.'<sup>20</sup> Each of us must at some time in our lives have seen someone collecting food amongst the wooden crates and cardboard boxes left by vendors at the end of the market day, but we have probably never thought of such people as rich or privileged.

Dans le même panier was presented as an exhibition,<sup>21</sup> in the galleries Saint Eustache, in the Les Halles district of Paris, and where she exhibited a series of the jars of preserves, in so called storage units and reliquaries. This importantly offered a symbolic synthesis: in the process of producing these small jars, preserving, valuing and redistributing something that had previously considered waste, the thought that went into this work was also collected. As another component of the work, an outdoor buffet was organized at Les Halles market, for which the renowned chef, Stohler, created and offered to passers-by elegant dishes made from all the leftovers collected and recycled during the six months of work.

This intervention, like many of Orta's other works, has its roots in the political artworks of the 1970s and 1980s, but it distances itself from these by refusing to travel roads already taken and, above all, in its resistance of any attempt to affirm some fixed truth. Instead it allows for public participation, provoking discussion and bringing to light issues without aiming to resolve them.<sup>22</sup> Orta's interventions are not closed, determined or paradigmatic, but instead attempt to stand up to future reflection on and analysis of the reality that surrounds us.

A few years after the Parisian happening, a similar work Hortirecycling Enterprise – Act II (1999), was created at Secession, Vienna. Objects were produced for exhibition (Conservation Unit, Reliquaries, Stirring spoons, etc.), but on this occasion the work was presented more formally in bags, containers and the mobile structure, Processing Units. A cooking surface with a refrigerator and storage underneath, this was not only a functional structure but a symbol for the transformation and use of food. The investigation was created through the 'Ortian' procedure of discussing and investigating every aspect with the gallery staff, as well as 'visiting and discussing issues of the enterprise with the Naschmarkt vendors, contacting a renowned Viennese chef, Staud, who is now composing the recipes for the rejected fruit preserves.'<sup>23</sup>

70 x 7 The Meal

<sup>19</sup> *Un panier plein me suffit pour toute la semaine; si j'en prenais plus, ce serait du gaspillage.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ramasser des légumes, c'est pour les riches. Il faut avoir un réfrigérateur pour les garder et un four pour les cuire.*

<sup>21</sup> Curated by Jérôme Sans for Forum Saint-Eustache, Paris, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Concerning the differences between Orta's work and other activist art, the critic Jen Budney writes: 'Orta's approach is entirely different, in that each project she undertakes she makes direct contact with others and does her best to leave behind new, permanent infrastructures such as recycling programs, creative, paid work, projects for the unemployed or a curriculum for schools. While governmental and charitable institutions continue to devote themselves to cost-efficiency and 'turn-around', her projects emphasize patience and close attention to detail whilst working with people from all sectors of society.' In *Lucy Orta – Secession*, Vienna, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Lucy Orta interviewed by Hou Hanru, in *Lucy Orta – Secession*, Vienna, 1999.

As we have seen, it is not only the phenomenon of the waste and recovery of food that is important for Orta, but the emblematic, collective liturgy connected with its consumption. 70 x 7 the Meal was a series of lunches organized by Lucy and Jorge in which this ritual component was underlined in various ways, from the use of the number 7, chosen as the amount of initial invitees, to the production of the tablecloths and plates, to the choice of colours and the arrangement of people and objects. Even the mechanism of involvement by proxy – the artist's invented formula whereby she invited seven people who, in turn, invited another seven – becomes a new way of inventing a ritual that can extend, practically without control, the diversity of people invited. Once again, a human chain of knowledge and contacts is formed. In the exemplary work 70 x 7: Act IV, practically the entire population of Dieuze, a tiny French town of roughly 1,500 people, sat down at a 300 metre-long table to share the same meal. This event, the seeming antithesis of intimacy, symbolically took on the role of the Public Square or street.

It is evident how important food is as a cultural vehicle for reciprocal understanding. The act of eating together brings about a physical sharing, a spontaneous and free socialization. These aspects have been highlighted over the last few decades by other artists (Rikrit Tiravanija's invitation to gallery visitors to share a Thai curry, for example, or Felix Gonzalez-Torres' endlessly replenishable piles of sweets), but in 70 x 7 The Meal they are more ordered and ritualized.

In an analogous way to the choice of fabrics, forms and colours for works like *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture*, in this piece the design particulars of the objects are important. Plates become containers with content; tablecloths become surfaces to paint, 'tattoo' and utilize symbolically. As Orta herself has put it: '[T]he aesthetic content is very important to all my work. Take for example the Royal Limoges dinner service in a small rural town in the north of France. There were complaints from local associations that we were wasting money on the china. "Why not use paper plates?" I am particularly sensitive to offering an original design and quality to all people and it was clear that the Limoges signature and the comments on the graphics enameled on the plates were an important part of the whole event.'<sup>24</sup>

#### THE ENVIRONMENT AGAIN: MOBILE INTERVENTION UNITS

In 2001, participating in the show 'Transform' in Trieste,<sup>25</sup> Orta proposed Vehiconnector (M.I.U), an installation in which she transformed old military field ambulances into civilian survival units, decorating them with images representing themes connected with survival. On one side of the vehicle dedicated to food surplus were images of mad cows and recycling; on the other, the lack of drinking water and the plight of Rwandan refugees. Similar to her fabrics, the external surfaces of these vehicles (which by their very nature force us to think of situations of emergency and danger) become public spaces for the posing of questions. The two Vehiconnectors installed in Piazza Unità d'Italia (the city's main square) acquired a particular significance because the show was organized to coincide with an important public event: the G8 Summit dedicated to the environment. Parked right in front of the hotel where the ministers of the world's 'big eight' were staying, the two Vehiconnectors offered themselves as monuments to the problems to be dealt with.<sup>26</sup>

Orta's use of public space in this context encourages us to reflect on the way in which the concept of the monument came into being, whether images can represent a local community's shared values, and which images will have impact when symbolically placed in the middle of a town square. In this instance, the topicality of the event may have distracted somewhat from this issue, but it did not deprive of significance the fact that Orta's proposal placed itself squarely in contrast to the celebrative tradition of the monument, which normally praises power and authority in general. Her work is bound to the opposite concept: usable, transformable, non-assertive, but simultaneously emotional and interrogative.

<sup>24</sup> Transcription of the lecture by Lucy Orta published in *La Generazione delle immagini 7*, curated by Roberto Pinto *Tales of Identity*, Edizioni Comune di Milano, 2002, pp.136–67.

<sup>25</sup> *Transform*, exhibition catalogue, Emanuela De Cecco and Roberto Pinto (eds), CONAI, Milan, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> They were the only vehicles in the city centre. Due to tight security, cars and any other removable objects were prohibited.

This event can be seen as another strand in the investigation of the environmental problem, expressed in many works, most notably in *Dans le même panier. Commune Communicate* (1996) an urban happening created in Metz, France,<sup>27</sup> can be read from a similar perspective. Lucy Orta organized a workshop with a group of prison inmates in the Metz detention centre, discussing about their crime, their daily life, their problems and their hopes for the future. She passed on the photographs, messages, and conversations recorded during her encounter, to the inhabitants in the centre of Metz, using *Communication Suitcases* containing, walkmans, audio recordings, a set of postcards and the stamped address of the detention centre. The passer-by was encouraged to write a message on the postcards to the inmate. Here, the artist used public space in order to establish a dialogue on diverse levels: between people and political leaders in Trieste during the G8 summit, between jailed and free people, and between inside and outside. In *Citizen Platform* (1997) at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, another dialogue was established, this time between citizens and figures of authority where, by way of postcards, the three 'R's of environmentally friendly development were supported: 'Reduce, Re-Use and Recycle'.

Our eyes have become accustomed to the alarming data broadcast by the many organizations that deal with environmental problems, and this myopia keeps us in a state of semi-indifference that prevents change. Orta's works cause us to reflect on how rarely environmental damage inflicted by our actions is taken into consideration, and how the environmental cost of the things we buy is seldom considered. A perfect example can be seen in the global attitude to energy: only the costs of its production and distribution are taken into consideration, never the additional environmental costs. According to this logic, products made of carbon are cheaper than solar products, even if the collective costs – the greenhouse effect, the melting of the polar caps and diseases like cancer – are extremely high.<sup>28</sup>

All Orta's works have a foundation in these problematics, even if at times they are only hinted at. The processes are always laid open for discussion, though she may not always take up a specific position 'against'. Her works are poetic and aesthetic responses to the emergencies that our society is facing with diverse gradations of complicity.

#### WORKSHOP AND MORE ...

When one writes about the work of an artist, one is often inclined to imagine what its future development might be, underlining the aspect that currently seems to be the central point. Unfortunately, in doing so one risks re-reading the text later only to find it has developed in a completely different way. It seems obvious, however, that in the past few years Orta's work has been more and more dedicated, even in the planning phase, to collaboration. Both the greater role of the workshop and the habit of increasingly attributing the work to Studio Orta seems sufficient evidence of this constant tension. These two aspects are therefore worth addressing.

The works flowing out of the many workshops that Orta has created around the world are so interwoven with that already discussed that it is difficult to separate them. That said, at least some of them should be mentioned specifically, in so much as their procedure and results become in some way paradigmatic and can be considered autonomous projects.

The workshop organized for the Salvation Army in Paris (1993) and replicated in New York (1996) as part of the group exhibition 'Shopping' at Deitch Projects was exemplary in its premise and results. Orta asked visitors at the Cité de Refuge de L'Armée du Salut (the Salvation Army hostel, which is housed in a building constructed by Le Corbusier on the 13th Arrondissement) to make garments out of old clothes and accessories like gloves, belts, ties, zippers, etc. in order to twist their 'conventional' use towards a new function and identity. One of the work's conceptual nuclei was the reappropriation of the identity of people who are marginalized, without history and with no possibility of being made part of the community.

<sup>27</sup> Created thanks to the FRAC de Lorraine, Metz, France and to the Casino Luxembourg, which planned a series of 'Public Art Interventions'.

<sup>28</sup> Numerous books deal with the environmental problem tied to both direct and indirect economic costs, an example being Lester R. Brown's *Eco-economy: Building an Economy for the Earth*, Earth Policy Institute, Washington DC, 2001.

There was affirmation of identity even in the choice to construct garments, rather than simply accepting donated clothing.<sup>29</sup> This workshop aimed to give back visibility and, consequently, individuality to this group of marginalized people.

Even some fashion designers put themselves to work reassembling and regenerating the clothing, combining garments of different types and functions. The main objective of the work, which was curious enough to attract the attention of the public and the media, was, however, to research the situation it explored. Otherwise it would have revolved around the packaging of a 'sellable' product that neglected, or left unexplored, the social fallout of the project, a vision diametrically opposed to Orta's.

Another important series of workshops is Collective Dwelling, created for the first time at the contemporary art centre, Creux de l'Enfer, in Thiers, France during the show *Touche pour Voir* (1997), which focused on audience collaboration. This piece involved the participation of teenagers from the Arc-en-Ciel foster home and the Sonia Delaunay high school. With these children Orta attempted to investigate the idea of the body as a shared and mobile space. They also addressed the axioms of works like *Refuge Wear* and *Collective Wear*, which were discussed through the vision of the adolescents, who were asked to create a modular section of the work.

The element that runs through all these works is the nature of the artistic project, no longer seen as the inspiration of the solitary genius, but as the product of a collective intelligence,<sup>30</sup> in which the participants Deleuze would call them 'intercedents'<sup>31</sup> are the co-authors. Pierre Restany speaks of an 'aesthetic relationale' and although Orta never worked with Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined the term<sup>32</sup> – the definition lends itself perfectly to her credo.

At this point it is permissible to wonder what remains of the artist in a workshop or studio situation. The answer is, a good deal. The artist's role is in configuring a new road in order to interpret an ancient role, whereby he or she becomes a true motor, a generator of initiatives, a stimulator of creative energies and analyses of problems; a sort of director who puts in gear situations that do not limit themselves to speaking an artistic language or to reflecting on the beauty of the image created. This is Orta's role within Studio Orta, in which the other important figure is Jorge Orta, with whom she is developing a series of works in progress. The first of these is *Opéra.tion Life Nexus*, whose objective is to be a sort of container to be filled with contents by who, from time to time, collaborate to construct with Studio Orta each of its phases. *Opéra.tion Life Nexus* came about following an idea conceived by Jorge Orta in 1996 for a work that will grow and evolve until 2006 in an attempt to build a territory of experimentation and research, a common space for workers of diverse disciplines. The artists involved were invited to create a module over a period of ten years, composed of music, dance, sculpture, lights, video projections or any other medium deemed useful to continue the project. *Opéra.tion Life Nexus* shares the methods and underlying philosophy of previous works, and Studio Orta models itself on the same projects. Orta herself defines the enterprise as a 'spiral' that retracts or expands according to the importance and complexity of the project. The studio is a centre for production but, above all, for co-coordinating the activities of numerous categories of people (architects, craftsmen, fashion designers, people who dedicate themselves to the research of data or to the co-ordination of activities).

<sup>29</sup> To honour this condition of marginalization and lack of society, Orta shifted the initial objective of making one's own clothing to a more generic construction of clothing. As the residents felt uncomfortable to work in that personal level. It is interesting that the participants in the workshop were exclusively male, which underlines the fact that there are different gradations of homeless and marginalized experience, and groups of people with whom it is more difficult to make contact.

<sup>30</sup> See Pierre Lévy, *L'intelligenza Collettiva. Antologia del Cyberspazio*, La Découverte, Paris, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Gli intercessori', *L'Autre Journal*, No. 8, October 1985, conversation with Antoine Dulaure and Claire Parnet: 'That which is essential are the intercedents. Creation is intercedents. Without them there is no work. It can refer to people – for a philosopher, artists or scientists, for a scientist, philosophers or artists – but even to plants, animals, as in Castaneda. Fictitious or real, animate or inanimate, their own intercedents need to be fabricated. It is a series. If a series is not formed, even completely imaginary, it is lost. I need my intercedents in order to express myself, and they cannot be expressed without me: you always work in many even when it doesn't seem to be so. It is even greater when it is visible: Felix Guattari and I are intercedents for one another.'

<sup>32</sup> I am referring to *Relational Aesthetics*, edited and translated into English by Les Presses du Réel, Dijon, 2002.

When Studio Orta's pieces return from exhibitions, they go to a final collecting point, The Dairy, La Laiterie Moderne, a rare example of the regional industrial heritage located in Brie 60 kilometres from Paris. This immense workshop with beamed ceilings, vaulted brickworks and typical Briard style outhouses is the centre for a new episode. Rooted firmly in the belief that the creative disciplines should debate and rethink the traditional principles of social structures, introduce new ideas that have a profound engagement with society, urban planning, cultural heritage and political and ecological policies. The Dairy is to be host to an unfolding series of residences and collaborations that can be viewed online at [www.fluidarchitecture.net](http://www.fluidarchitecture.net). It is here, fittingly, that our trip comes to an end (to take off later for some other part of the world). These newly created things are held here in the hope that eventually they too will act as 'intercedents' for the works and reflections of others.

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