

**Title, The Human Element, 70 x 7 The Meal**

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Lucy Orta's *70 x 7 The Meal* takes as its starting point the creation of multiplication game designed to stimulate conviviality and communication, and with its impetus in the biblical Christian signification of 'infinity'<sup>1</sup>. The work is a pretext for the encounters of multiples of seven guests at a potentially endless series of meals. The series *70 x 7 The Meal*, which begins at Act 3, evolved out of two earlier projects. Act 1 is *Dans le même panier (All in One Basket)* (1997), in which waste produce from local markets were collected and transformed in to syrups, jams and preserves, and Act 2 is *Hortirecycling Enterprise* (1999), a similar project in which she proposed a system for recycling food using mobile kitchens created specifically for the project. For each meal in the *70 x 7* series the artist produces a limited edition of Royal Limoges porcelain plates and a so-called 'endless' hand silk-screen printed tablecloth. Additionally, at each meal multiples of seven plates are designed, individually made and presented as multiples. The design of each set of plates is quite different and evokes the subject of conversation to be raised for discussion. A recurring theme in the design, however, is that of the heart, a symbol that 'is in all the editions in various forms; anatomical, edible, ancestral, scientific, poetic, biological ...'<sup>2</sup>

At these communal events, a combination of the ordinary and the everyday intermingles with the provocative and debatable, as individuals, deliberately drawn from different social, political and economic backgrounds, are invited to share a meal, often leading to demanding, unusual and unexpected conversations. Here all certainties of identity are dissolved into myriad ambiguities that involve change, transformation, loss and gain, love and hate – all the dramatic but actual elements of human experience.

The *70 x 7 The Meal* series is an excellent example of a new form of populist interaction and direct experiential engagement in which the artist develops a proactive practice in order to encourage communication between the artwork and different publics. Exhibiting artwork in this way is at once critical, joyful and engaging for a broad art public, and not merely for the 'initiated'. In this way, the work is allowed to exist as a viable part of social reality, not only as a single-sided object or effect set up for public edification. Key to these concerns are the needs to transform the modernist safety zone of art presentation and display, and to work against the bounds of the archival, informational, ideologically limited and the exclusively visual in order to stimulate a more open-ended, non-didactic interaction between art and its multiform audiences. *70 x 7 The Meal* promotes the subjective view over the mediated representation, emphasising the notion of individuated identity.

Recently, a number of exhibitions have explored the renewed interest in issues of realism and the 'real'. In more than a few of these exhibitions the possibilities of a sense-based communicational has been foregrounded. The senses of touch, smell, taste and hearing play a major role in fostering an awareness of artwork as a 'felt' reality, rather than just as a retinally based communiqué. Perhaps one reason for this growing interest is the increasing textualization of everyday life. With practically every facet of reality increasingly subject to manipulation and spin, it is often difficult to find room for reflection among the various virtualities, and it becomes ever more tenuous conveying meaning – whether aesthetic, poetic, spiritual or otherwise – based on assumptions of shared transcendence. Inevitably the *70 x 7* meals become complex situations; they directly confront Baudrillard's view of reality as an implosion of alterity and difference into a digitalized accumulation of repetitive effects. Rather, the dinners are communal spectacles that emphasize individuality and singularity with participants deliberately chosen from diverse backgrounds – a selection of winners and losers, lonely hearts and social butterflies, radicals and politicians from opposing parties. From the initial indicators for conversation inscribed on the plates and the tablecloth, an extraordinary concoction of transactional possibilities can often result. Unexpected shifts of conversation trace the individual voice in all its originality, without didactic effort, and a play of communication, a more fluid inter-subjectivity

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<sup>1</sup> And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. (Luke 17.4)

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with the artist, 27 March 2003.

announces itself, initiating an ongoing chain of personalized dialogues, often with a local flavour in its topics, politics and gossip.

In some cases (as in Dieuze, Mexico City, Essex and Eindhoven) co-creation workshops precede the meal. Members of the local community or participants in the dinner are invited to take a part in the production and organization of the meal. This process, which includes discussions and performances, and contributions to the recipes, manifestos and graphics, extends the personalised and subjective vision that contributes to the underlying context and design of the event.

Lucy and Jorge Orta set up *70 x 7 The Meal* as a model of communal communication and potential regeneration to commemorate the commitment and life-long work of Padre Rafael García Herreros whose vision demonstrated the transformative capacity that culture and education can play in the development of communities. Herreros initiated a series of benefit banquets to raise money for a major social development project in Bogotá. The project was designed to radically transform the most abandoned zones of the city into thriving communities, and consisted a regeneration programme involving constructing community schools, family housing with gardens, a theatre, a contemporary art museum, small factories and a university. The meals were so successful that they raised enough funds to construct 'El Minuto de Dios', a whole district of the city.

Lucy and Jorge Orta have initiated twenty meals in the *70 x 7* series since 2000 each meal inciting new discussion and debate. The series intends to jumble both identities and our notions of identity through an open-ended conversation that can lead in any direction. It is significant that Orta's non-linear method starts a process of transporting and transforming ideas and identities using complex layering rather than a supposed clarity of knowledge. On a social level, we are now experiencing a new 'techno life' since in many contemporary situations, we don't really have to create things or physically make them, we need only programme them in a Cronenberg/Spielberg manner. In a sense, the whole world has become a kind of literature – an incessant, ongoing work in process, proposing reality, art and culture as a service economy of virtual narratives we can choose to buy at will.<sup>3</sup>

*70 x 7 The Meal* articulates a 'multiple' text, expanded from the usual art formality and homogeneity. Through the very structure of the meals, the ambiguities of life become part of the scenario, complicating and questioning realities. The events introduce flexible or fractured identities, imperfections, arguments and disagreements; the meals also allow the possibility new connections and dialogues between diverse segments of society that would not ordinarily meet. The discussions between individuals with independent opinions can bring out transgression and change, affection and perhaps even love.

A real situation of sharing a meal turns into a virtuality of possibility. Orta's dinners actualize virtualities from the personal, social, cultural and political realities that surround us all. Each encounter also brings about a collective pseudo-fictional experience as an alternative reality to daily life. This is especially significant in today's society where so much has become information based and standardized, a virtual text of illusionary ready-made 'spin' realities, substituting for the hopes and dreams, losses and gains of life.

The exhibition 'The Invisible Touch' (Kunstraum Innsbruck, 2000) initiated the project with *70 x 7 The Meal, act III, Innsbruck 2000* and instigated the commission of the first dining set and tablecloth for the meal. This took the form of an edition of 490 Royal Limoges porcelain plates; seven plates encased in seventy beech wood boxes; and an aluminium hand-screen-printed tablecloth measuring 49 metres. An image of an artichoke was the central motif on the plates, representing a heart enveloped with endless leaves waiting to be peeled back, in a kind of exposure.

For *70 x 7 The Meal, act III, Innsbruck 2000*, Orta invited people from very diverse backgrounds – musicians, actors, politicians, organic farmers, bureaucrats, business people, doctors, etc. – to two meals held in the gallery. Of the fourteen guests invited to attend the first meal, seven were instructed to invite an additional six guests of their choice to a second meal, lending a performative continuity to the event. The food was surplus produce collected from vendors at the local markets, and prepared in a simple and modest manner by a local chef. The provider and the preparer of the food were less important than what was extracted from them – a willingness to participate in something new and as yet unknown to them. In this and other ways, the project explores a model of communal democracy. With minor alterations to take account of each particular situation this process continues in each site

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Feuerstein

where the event takes place, though the blurring of formal homogenous or standardized co-ordinates occurs differently in every location.

For *70 x 7 The Meal, act XVI*, which took place on Friday, 7 June, 2002 in Bolzano, Italy, twenty-one diverse guests – once again specifically drawn from different socio-cultural groups and nationalities, and with diverse political inclinations – were each asked to invite seven other people to participate in a communal meal on Waltherplatz, Bolzano's central piazza, making for an astonishing total of 168 attendants. Walthers', a prominent local restaurant catered for the whole event. A limited edition set of 490 Royal Limoges plates and a tablecloth designed by the artist provided the setting for this celebratory open-air event.

Orta's ceremonies reveal a connection to the exigencies of ritual behaviour. *70 x 7 The Meal* has oblique similarities in terms of communication and entertainment with the traditional Japanese geisha. As part of her training, the geisha is presented around Gion – in the past Kyoto's main geisha district. She is introduced in ritual manner to the mistresses of all the proper teahouses, to the man who makes wigs for stage performances, to the chefs at the important restaurants, and so on. At night she entertains her customers and patron under strict codes of behaviour, for example, she eats only when specifically invited or requested to do so by a customer. Geisha entertainment is prescribed by an intensive schooling that covers not only dance and tea ceremony but also music playing, singing and other arts. The geisha's training is a very deliberate strategy. And in fact, the 'gei' of geisha means 'arts', so 'geisha' really means 'artisan' or 'artist'. Her work is an artwork. A geisha, above all, is a performative entertainer: she initiates communication. Lucy and Jorge Orta, in an elliptical relation to the formal geisha manner, transform the ancient ritual of the meal into a poetic event that brings people together, to meet, to talk and to share a moment of communal reflection.

*70 x 7 The Meal, act XVIII Graz 2002* was arranged for the Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz (2002). An initial dinner for forty-nine people was followed by a buffet for 252 people. The edition of thirty-five sets of seven plates produced for the event was surprisingly bare of decoration except for a bright red ambulance convoy that accentuated the rim. For the first time however the underside of the plates was covered with quite vibrant and breathtaking colour images. Giving in to the impulse to turn the plate over and discover the origin of the porcelain, guests were confronted with a series of 'target windows' representing visions of human conflict: boat people, refugees, displaced people, famine victims, and the homeless. A hopeful future figured too in the depiction of children who are involved with the artists' *Escuela 21* project, a non-profit organisation that coordinates an education programme in Latin America.

Using the 'haute bourgeois' Limoges china in combination with such images of human suffering, as well as the ambulances as symbols of aid, the Orta plates set up, deliberately or unwittingly, an ironic disjunction. In the case of the meal in Graz, lending the plates to a local restaurant for public use for two years took the growing interactive element of the *70 x 7 The Meal* a step further. The symbol of the artichoke/heart on the final plate completes the circle back to the first meal held in Innsbruck.

Unlike more conventional artwork, interactive projects such as Orta's require unique attention because they more delicately and more aggressively test the limits of living with and responding to art. Orta's practice initiates a movement of subjective negotiation from within the self towards a view of others, bringing up in singular terms the profound ethical aesthetic paradigm shift in the relation between the self and the other.<sup>4</sup> The meals resemble living organisms, displaying all the peculiarities of individual existences and so they entail practices outside of traditional curatorial roles. They are not based on the ego of the artist but on the staging, enacting and re-enacting of the reality of the individual participants. Since it is less didactic, less rhetorical, and less egocentric, and more socially politicized, Orta's work could be described more as a 'performative interaction' rather than a performance.

Orta is careful to avoid the trappings of formal extravagance and equally careful to project simplicity in the selection of food offerings. Although local 'celebrity' chefs are often invited to participate with great panache, they are asked to use regional and seasonal food, and in some cases left-overs, so marking the difference with precious or formally staged 'food art' performances and dinners such as those of Daniel Spoerri and Rirkrit Tiravanija. *70 x 7 The Meal* is not a question of offering great food or entertainment. Orta's performative action is based on sharing, on a movement from the singular egocentric moment to generous exchanges and subjective multiplicities.

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<sup>4</sup> Felix Guitari, *An ethical chaos*, Vienna University Press 1995

*There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many? And Jesus said, Make the people sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. So the people sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would. (John 6.9-11)*

Maia Damianovic is an independent curator and art critic, based in Vienna. She contributes to various publications, including Tema Celeste, Artpress and Trans Magazine. Damianovic's curatorial projects include 'The Invisible Touch', Kunstraum Innsbruck (2000), 'Days of Hope', Frame Program of the Venice Biennale (2001), 'Enactments of the Self', steirischer herbst (2002) and 'To Actuality', ARGE Kunst Bozen (2002).