

A photograph of two figures standing side-by-side in front of a modern building with a grid of yellow and white panels. Both figures are wearing long, red, hooded raincoats with blue piping along the seams. The figure on the left has a circular graphic on the side of their coat, and the figure on the right has a white rope graphic. The figures' faces are visible through the hoods. The ground is paved and wet, reflecting the scene.

# Lucy Orta

PHAIDON

Roberto Pinto Nicolas Bourriaud Maia Damianovic Paul Virilio

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**Paul Virilio** What has interested me in your work is firstly that it is 'in situ' work. The problem in art today is that of its delocalisation. There's a lot of talk about deconstruction, but what seems to me more important is its delocalisation. In a sense art is no longer found in galleries or in museums, if it ever was, but where mutating social situations condense – situations which renew our relationship to the world. Art is one of the elements of the *welterscheinung*, of our vision of the world, and this vision is constantly changing. I first encountered your work in the street, where things change. My discipline takes its name from the street. The street is rush, hurry, what the Greeks call *dromos*. Dromology is the science of speed, of rush. The root of *rue* (road), remember, is *ruée* (rush); hurry comes from the same root.

At the time when I first encountered your work I was working on urban beacons, new facilities which are not dwellings but kiosks in the traditional sense of the word. Your urban equipment appeared in the street too, and they interested me because they were pertinent, primarily because they were outrageous. Just as my urban beacons had created an outcry among architects, who had perceived them as just that, a sign of alarm, I saw your work as an alarm signal, one alerting us to a new human fragility and precarity.

I really don't know whether we should call it art or not. It was art in as much as it was taking stock of a situation. It was art in that it was a plea to take into account a relationship with the body. Remember that art originated in the body, came out of the body of dance, out of the theatrical body and war paint and tattoos. Art, before emancipating itself on the walls of galleries, did so on the body itself, through the transformation of the body into form. Your works seemed to me like cave paintings which had drawn themselves round the body. The body, clothed as it were by your *Refuge Wear*, becomes a kind of witness to the threats to it. Not only of threats posed by unemployment, social insecurity and so on, but also the danger of the body vanishing into virtuality, into cyberbody, into 'hyperbody' and other so-called 'post-human' techniques. Your work seemed to lie at the crossroads between the threat to bodies struggling against cold, unemployment and unhappiness, and this interested me a great deal since as an architect I am concerned with this too and with the body's disappearance, through virtualisation, the

creation of clones and spectres, and telepresence. There is, therefore, in my view, a topicality to your work. That's what I wanted to say to start with.

Lucy Orta **Did you see the collective events, the garments for eight people, the *Nexus Architectures*, which are site-specific performances?**

**Virilio** Yes, I saw those too. They made me think of how we resort to collective body practices to survive. To survive one is obliged to form a pack. Primeval animals lived in packs. No animal emancipated itself from the group. Rats are sometimes even found with their tails knotted together, forming a collective entity. The survival of most animals is linked to living in packs. Your collective garments were denouncing man's return to the pack. At a time when we are told that man is free, emancipated, hyper-autonomous, a 'walkman', you're saying no, wait a minute, we're in danger of banding together again into packs, gangs and new tribes. The collective clothing also made me think of commando tactics. I come from a military background, so I'm familiar with the question of war, and commando tactics are group practices. Everyone protects each other, watches each other's back. A commando's life depends on his comrade. In your work, one person's warmth is another's. There are signs, pathological symptoms which run counter to the myth of comfort, of a man alone in an apartment, alone with his computers. There is also in the work the will to preserve bodies, to save them from their solitude, from dying alone.

Orta **There is the social bond, 'Nexus', which is a bond that facilitates communication, sharing, shared experience and communication in general.**

**Virilio** I think that the work you are doing can never be dissociated from the threat of regression it evokes, which was the same threat one felt with the beacons. Behind the innovation, the novelty of clothing like that, of a collective garment, of a suit for surviving in reality, lies the fear of a regression. If someone says your work is entirely positive, optimistic, benevolent, then they've understood nothing. There is a tragedy, a 'dramatic art', one could say, in your work. Your work is akin to Antonin Artaud's and William

Shakespeare's. There is no art without drama. This is very important.

**Orta** A question that preoccupies me is whether I should commercialise the *Habitent*, the tent which transforms into a poncho. There are situations in which it could come in useful, such as natural catastrophes, refugee situations, cases of really extreme urgency. But, is this really what one should be pursuing as an artist?

**Virilio** I think that if you were welcomed, and this was a miracle, and I use the word miracle intentionally, by the Salvation Army and the Protestant Church, it is because your work goes beyond art, and the art market's commercialization. Vincent Van Gogh sold only one painting during his lifetime. And for someone like Artaud the notion of sale or commercialisation doesn't exist. Commercialization comes after death. It's your heirs' meal ticket not yours. In my opinion, all avant-garde art, and I include your work here, is outside commercialisation. Take Franz Kafka, he published only one or two books in his lifetime, then left instructions for Max Brod to burn all his works. I sense that you are similar.

**Orta** We're talking about humanitarian art. Isn't that precisely what one should do: go out and address humanitarian needs, work towards a new artistic questioning?

**Virilio** I think the humanitarian question is inseparable from the social dimension. You are working in a period of social disintegration. You are making collective clothing at a time when divorce is on the increase, and are proposing a kind of marriage by garment to prevent people drifting apart. It's extraordinary. At a time when there are more and more single parent families, there you are making collective clothing in which parents and children share the same garment – a garment which is a symptomatic metaphor of the state of a society. So I'd say your work is more social than humanitarian. Even if these garments can help or save people, their primary purpose is to warn us about social decomposition, social divorce.

The latest United Nations survey puts the number of homeless people in the world at five-hundred million. It is mind boggling. So on the one hand you have five-hundred

million homeless and the question of their precarious habitat, and on the other the breakdown of society with families breaking down. As well as divorce and remarriage, we now have the problem of 'CNCs', 'non-cohabiting couples' – I have some among my students – who marry to not live together but to remain separate. Their children are born into an alternating existence, exactly as if their parents were divorced. One can see this as symptom of a new insecurity different to that of the unemployed. It is the social insecurity of solitary individuals. I'm wondering whether we can consider these non-cohabiting couples or single-parent families to be humanitarian aid cases. I think not, and yet it's a real problem.

So I think that the work you are doing is more social than humanitarian. It denounces a situation of social disintegration which you reveal in your projects and which your projects do not alleviate. But it functions on another level too. When I see your figures, because for me your garments are figures, I think of Hieronymus Bosch. The work you do is the same as his. When he paints hell, he doesn't show hell in all its horror – people massacring each other – but people in strange situations: living inside fruit, dressed in a lemon. This isn't humanitarian.

**Orta** *Refuge Wear* has been installed in all kinds of places: inside railway stations with crowds constantly milling by, and outside where it was isolated, vulnerable and exposed to the world.

**Virilio** In this sense, there is a prophetic dimension in your work. This is its essential vocation. I think that the realist aspect is less important than the prophetic dimension.

There is another element, which is the development of what one could term packaging. It goes without saying that there is a packaging ideology in our society, which goes hand in hand with communication and mobility; firstly to facilitate transport and secondly to facilitate the message. Packaging is the wrapping of the message which sells the product that is packaged. It seems to me that in your work there is a reflection on packaging, on the garment no longer considered as body covering, as a second skin, but as packaging, somewhere midway between architecture and clothing. We have multiple skins: underwear, clothes, overcoat – onion layers that one can further add to: sleeping bag, tent, cargo container, house and so on. Your work is part of this. Because the garment

sweats, it emancipates itself, expands, attempts to become a house or a vehicle. For example, there is clothing that can be inflated to help survival in the sea.

**Orta** Like the objects I showed at the 1995 Venice Biennale.

**Virilio** Yes, the garments became inflatable life rafts. The idea is that the garment is more than just a garment, it becomes a vehicle for survival and against anonymity. I'll give an example, in London, many homeless people paint themselves white to look like ghosts. In my view, this is very important because these people have understood that it isn't enough to beg, one has to dramatise one's person. They no longer need to hold out their hand, they are already excluded by their costume. There is an information dimension, which the writing on *Refuge Wear* explains further. Sandwich board men also 'wear' signs, but advertising is an entirely different kind of message. Again, your work makes me think of Hieronymus Bosch because it puts the body into situations involving volumes, into niches. This perhaps has to do with solitude. In my view, there's a parallel here, between his hell and your street, because the street today is hell for the people you're talking about.

**Orta** After *Refuge Wear*, I began more in-depth work with people in difficulty, first with Salvation Army residents, then with inmates, children in care homes and unemployed people. These workshops are closely linked to the artistic process. For example in the *Identity + Refuge* workshop, we transformed abandoned clothes, giving them a new lease of life – not just the objects but the workshop's participants as well.

**Virilio** Well, that's extremely interesting because I know women who run writing workshops and in a sense I can see the same approach in your work, one which I would call feminine. I'm neither a feminist nor a macho, merely a man of my generation. In these workshops, people who have lost out, who no longer know how to write, who have forgotten how to, can put themselves back into their story. They don't come to write French, this is not part of an illiteracy programme. They're given a pencil and told, 'Describe your life, the situation you're in. Try. Don't worry about spelling mistakes, just put it down in writing.' I happen to know quite a few social workers who work this way and it's extraordinary the 'customer loyalty' they manage to create. These people, whether they're immigrant workers or French, get back in touch with themselves again by literally

writing their story, sometimes pages and pages. No longer blocked by literary form, they manage to say things and reconstruct their minds through the therapy of writing. This is what I think you do by sewing, by 'writing' your garments, which tell a kind of story.

Take, for instance, Van Gogh's painting of the boots that Martin Heidegger analyses. What are these boots? Are they Van Gogh's boots? Did he find them in the street? We know perfectly well that a garment or a pair of shoes says much about the person who wears them, and it seems to me that the work you just described has the same purpose. The therapy goes into the garment which becomes a story. It is no longer simply a piece of clothing in which to keep warm or cool. It is the antithesis of the uniform, which deprives the wearer of his story. The work you're doing is antithetical in this respect. A uniform is a collective garment that everyone wears – everyone wears the same suit so everyone is in the same regiment – which is the opposite of your clothing. How does the uniform differ from the collective garment? And how does the collective garment illustrate a different collectiveness from that of the regiment?

**Orta** Did you see my exhibition at the 'Ateliers de l'ARC' at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris?

**Virilio** Yes, and I was very struck by it. I forgot everything else I saw except the room you were in and the work by my students, a project on reading, with books that were also a kind of manifesto but which didn't have the power of your work. The other work in the show was all just grimaces to me and so it wasn't art. It was nothing. It didn't touch on any kind of reality. I'm perhaps being cruel, but I don't mean to be, I'm just saying what I think. I really have the impression that there were only two things there, but above all one, that were something solid, which had a truth, an authenticity and a frankness to them. We've all had enough of the comedians *dell'arte*. There are too many actors in art. So your work seemed to me to turn the exhibition on its head. In your space, one was no longer in the exhibition, one was in something else which had far more value than the rest. The rest didn't stand up, it was just galleries presenting gimmicks.

In a certain sense, the critical function of your work is superior to the exhibition function. You liquidate the context and I'm sure you don't make many friends doing so. I have great admiration for your work, because it is completely innovative. You're still pursuing the same route, irrespective of what people think. There is in your work

something which evokes primitive art. When we talk about primitive art, we're talking about an art whose originators 'made do' with whatever came to hand and about the violence that characterized their period. I find the same simplicity in your work and that it plays an absolutely specific role in your work.

As I said before, art came first from the body, and your work seems to me to be like cave paintings drawn on the body. The body, clothed not simply by a type of garment – overgarment or undergarment – but also by a social way of doing this.

It is therefore very difficult for someone to exhibit next to you, impossible even, but that's okay. I have to say I hardly go to the galleries at all anymore. I'm fed up with art, with what people still call art. I think we are on the verge of a catastrophe.

**Orta** **It's hard today to not take into account cultural networks and exhibition places.**

**Virilio** Perhaps insecurity is art too. Perhaps the artists who exhibit in museums are already art's homeless. Maybe they are already people in situations of social insecurity and exponents of an art struggling for survival. Survival not from dying of hunger but from lack of meaning. Art is losing its meaning. While traditional art lives on, of course.

Translated by David Wharry.

Previously unpublished.