

Book title, Lucy + Jorge Orta Pattern Book, an introduction to collaborative practices

Title, Participation, Becoming, Action

Author, Janna Graham in conversation with Lucy + Jorge Orta

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Jana Graham

I never know where to begin, but perhaps, in this case, given that this is the first time you have been interviewed together, we should begin at the beginning. How did you encounter and then come to work and be together?

Lucy Orta

We met in 1991 in Paris at the opening of an exhibition of Jorge's recent work at the Galerie Paris-Bastille. It was the outbreak of the first war in Iraq. Jorge was frantically preparing a street action with the help of young artists and peace protestors, creating banners and protest documents using silkscreen techniques. They resembled nothing of the traditional anti-war protest media and this intrigued me. My mother had been an ardent activist during my youth: Greenham Common, environmental causes, heritage, and social welfare for immigrant Asian women, to name but a few. I was a recent fashion school graduate, establishing a successful career in the Paris fashion scene and had been involved in small pockets of activist work. Frustrated by the lack of a social or political agenda within the fashion world I joined Jorge's collective in his Bastille studio and this sparked a greater awareness of the potential of our creative powers and how these could be of more benefit to society. As well as Jorge's socially motivated processes and outcomes, I was interested in the pedagogic dimension of his artistic practice. This played an important role in my early intellectual and artistic development. Meeting Jorge marked my gradual entry into the domain of contemporary art.

JG It seems that there is a very particular pedagogical approach that has endured in your collaborative work, aligned with traditions of radical or even anti-pedagogy that are being recuperated in current art and activist practices. How did pedagogical interests enter into your working process?

Jorge Orta

My passion and engagement for art was an extension of the youth movement ideologies, in particular the obsession that we needed to build a more equitable world. Convinced that art had an important role to play in this process, it was important that we look for new audiences beyond the closed conservative circuits that existed in Rosario in the 1970's. I explored and experimented with all kinds of new approaches to making and diffusing art to the public at large, infiltrating the poetic aspects of art into people's daily lives, removing art and the artist from their pedestals. The vindications of the youth movements were dying out in Europe, but gaining in strength in Latin America as a result of the Che Guevara utopia and the new liberation theology. It was period of revolutionary ideas involving the Universities and elitist intellectuals.

As a consequence, the Dictators General Pinochet in Chile and General Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina took over power between 1976 and 1983. The state of siege banned the organization or holding of private or public meetings. To counteract this, we engaged in unofficial modes of organization. For example, we used the phone book as both a way of structuring chance encounters and creating

communication pedagogies. We chose five hundred people by chance over several pages, and contacted them one by one using human messenger services and coded postal mailings and sent a mini-exhibition to each person's home. Sometimes we telephoned a few and conducted a 'poema-concert' (concert poem) over the phone. The interrelations we wove together in this process prefigured the work that is conducted by Internet today. Our work was done collectively, with the complicity of young artists, friends and a group of my art school students.

JG Did the political situation necessitate a collapse between what elsewhere might be distinguished as artistic and organising practices? How did you conceptualise the relationship between the two?

JO We definitely invented our own ways of existing as artists. Of course, the museums were not interested in this art form, we were too far removed from traditional aesthetic preoccupations of that period, there were no commercial art galleries as we know them today, and we didn't even have anything to sell. Most of our work was given away for free. This is why we developed our own distribution/communication strategies. With my personal mentors and friends, artist Edgardo Vigo and Graciela G. Marx in Argentina, Clemente Padín in Uruguay and Damaso Ogaz in Venezuela developed Mail Art, to exchange our ideas and strategies in Latin America and elsewhere overseas. We believed in the statement: "An art from the base up wards, without artists!" The relationships: artist, artwork, production, diffusion and spectator, were the centre of my personal preoccupations, I thought that the artist, in his new role, should be the mediator of a collective process, someone who could develop the subjacent '*feasibility structures*' that could help realise the ideas and projects.

JG Did this notion of a "An art from the base up wards, without artists!" develop in relationship to the re-arrangements of power taking place in the self-organised 'base communities', that was growing out of the liberation theology movement in Latin America?

JO This notion was omnipresent, my stance was opposed to the general Marxist tendencies of the universities, which advocated for the armed cause symbolised by Che. In this very Catholic continent, I was close to the young pastors and very active in the new theology, which supported the underprivileged and minority communities, opposing the pressures from the extreme right wing and conservative church, which in fact formed the structural pillars of the dictatorship. I thought that the artist should disappear behind a form of collective dialogue and be representative of those that took part in it. There were no participants, I believed in co-creation, the possibility of a shared creation supported by a professional who could construct the '*feasibility structures*'. *This principle instructed our methods and guided us. We worked from the experienced of the "vivencia" (lived experience), of contextuality, to render more radical our daily lives, each one of us knew that the experience of working together would someday be taken away from us. "For a contextual Art"*

JG I'm really interested in what you are saying about the work being representative of the people involved but am wondering if the aim was really to seek representation. My impression is that this was a context in which representation was nearly impossible, and rather art making and organising converged to try to re-compose a set of social relations and orientations to power.

JO Yes, it's true. All of our energy was utilised to create interaction, a transmission about a shared

moment in life. Often, at the end of each project, we would take apart the tangible things we had produced. People would create beautiful artworks for days and nights, to the point of exhaustion only to then dismantle them or to burn them to ashes and begin once again. The experiences we lived through and the accounts of these experiences were proof of the work's lasting effect that often, the static object was often not able to convey.

JG This is such a different context from Paris in the 1980s, when you began your collaborative work. Was there any degree of translatability between what you were doing in Argentina and the way in which you approached your work together?

JO Coming to Paris in the 80s was a complete shock and it took me several years to overcome it. In Argentina there was no economic goal in our work. We wanted to provoke and stimulate a collective voice and act actively for the transformation of society through artistic channels. We all had parallel jobs to finance our art and often deprived ourselves of our family lives. When I arrived in Paris, I encountered a commercial art world with no social goal or interest. The FIAC art fair was the parameter of professional achievement. I was enrolled as a PhD student at the Sorbonne and attempted to reproduce some of the actions and performances from Argentina. No one wanted to collaborate. My colleagues were interested solely in their work as individual artists and obsessed by sales. But then the Iraq war broke out in 1990, the stock market crashed and the wave of impact on the world economics led to the terrible recession. The art system disintegrated, imploded, and finally there was a reason to platform the issues I had left in Argentina. The Kurdish refugee exodus, street protests, the visibility of homelessness brought the possibility of engaging directly with new audiences.

LO The economic situation Jorge described led to deeper social catastrophes, but also a general sense of negative fatalism and that there was nothing worth fighting for. He was working collectively with a wide variety of people, mainly non-artists. Here their attitude was different, optimistic and constructive. There was a sense of community and shared ideology that was more fraternal than existing Parisian artistic circles. This reality was also a million miles away from the mainstream egocentric contemporary art world and the world of fashion, where I was operating.

JG This convergence of the two practices - one oriented toward object or commodity production and the other resistant, working socially and ephemerally - still seems very present as a tension in your work. On one hand, there is a clear social and pedagogical process and often a political stake, on the other a kind of condensation of this process into forms that can circulate within the mechanics of distribution in the mainstream art system (no longer in a state of implosion). How do you negotiate this?

LO I don't necessarily see it as a tension. The object is really important and can speak for itself. It is an extension of the collaborative process, enabling us to communicate to a wider public these very huge issues. The object has a kind of universality and exists on a much longer trajectory. Look at the example of 'Refuge Wear - Habitent'. This portable shelter was created back in the early 1990's. It has subsequently travelled around the world and is the most published and exhibited artwork from our archive. It was made at a time when homelessness was not part of public discourse, but it should have been, now fifteen years later we see tent cities cropping up all over France surrounded by an unprecedented media attention. Or, the project 'Identity + Refuge' conducted in collaboration with the

residents of the Salvation Army. This work resulted in producing very unique items of women's wear clothing, which have been re-appropriated many times by eminent designers and fashion brands. The object has invaded different cultural domains, been reinterpreted, changed resonances, registering and re-registering. The object has the possibility to move between contexts in a way that processes or emotions cannot always.

JO Lucy often made the remark to me, that more I invested my energy in the process, the more removed I was becoming from art and the market that was beginning to take foothold and impose its rules, once again. It was a difficult period. How can we make art without giving way to a whole series of concessions or be excluded from the mainstream? Finally we took a decision and decided to work together, and produce a number of artworks that would be evidence of the numerous actions we had put into place. The strategy has proven appropriate and the repercussions of the artwork/process have multiplied.

JG So the object is a kind of interlocutor – a navette- shuttling between contexts and producing additional dialogue. But how does this relate to the political motivations in the work - the re-orientations of power in social and communicative relations - that seems to resist or problematize this kind of legibility? Are you concerned that the experiences of participants become homogenized and packaged into lifestyle products or reduced to simplified identity categories like 'homeless people' through this process?

LO When I created the Refuge Wear sculpture, there was a huge void of understanding between my activist motivations and the object. The formal aspects of the object were accepted but not its social implications. They would say, "The design technologies of the tent-cum poncho is amazing." I even won an award for innovation. On the other hand I heard, "What has this got to do with the problematic of social housing. Art should not make a social critique." Maybe those that critiqued wanted to avoid discussing the problem all together and suddenly the tent on a plinth deranged because it was too confrontational. Despite this, I must say that the circulation of the artworks within the museum or gallery circuit has been extremely important because they have established a dialogue with the critical domain and posed the questions that later were answered. Don't forget that historically, artists have depicted scenes of deprivation and horrors of war and we have a broader vision of our society thanks to these visual representations. Thankfully more and more contemporary artists are exposing us to our own reality and allowing us to reflect on our surroundings, just look at the proliferation of the new photo documentary techniques. But, aside from the museums, it is equally as important that the work dialogue with a broader non-cultural audience, and in areas usually abandoned by the cultural sector. The director of the Cité de Refuge, Salvation Army in Paris wrote in the exhibition catalogue "Art Fonction Sociale!" (Art Social Function!): "Art and culture should be included in the world of exclusion, if we can't go towards it, it should come to us."

JO From my perspective, the development of an object per se was never the issue. It is more the process of collective reflection and communication. The object creates a passage through which we create a dialogue, it's a mediator.

JG Jorge, this reminds me of a term you used earlier "vivencia", which is very familiar within the context participatory action research and popular education methods that were developed by people like Paulo Freire - I'm thinking here of the way that objects or externalized representations function in his Culture Circles as catalysts for collective reflection upon which processes of analysis and action can be built?

JO For those of us involved in liberation struggles, the first question was always to consider the context that one lives in, and to consider from here how to articulate this in a communal voice. It was at this time that I created the manifestos "Contextual Art", and "For a Catalyst Art", considering that the context is the root, and the dynamics of art is the catalyst that encourages the process of renovation. Lucy and I have incorporated this idea into the way we work, but this is one of many methodology we employ.

JG Could you say more about these methodologies?

JO Sure. We work with four primary approaches. The first is close to the way that we worked in Argentina. Within this approach we see ourselves as artists who do not operate as individuals but as facilitators of a process for communicating the sentiment, or feeling or the direction of the group. The issue of investigation in this practice is the communal sentiment. With our collaborators, we want to capture the feeling of the time and to create a dialogue around the issues of the time. Our process always begins collectively as a discussion through sketching and drawing around a subject such as water. We jot down ideas, conduct visual and textual research about the subject and begin to refine the issue until a common voice or idea surges from the mass.

The second approach – and this is undertaken with or without community collaborators – is to represent what is not being discussed. When we began, the subject of migration, 'sans-papiers' (without identity papers), homelessness were not part of the mainstream discussions. We felt we needed to intervene in this subject. Lucy began working on the Refuge Wear in 1990 as a result of the exodus of the Kurd refugees. Later we focused on the problem of food distribution and consumption, waste and recycling in the projects 'All in One Basket and Hortirecycling'. This research has been ongoing since 1996 and now food has become an important part of the public agenda. From 1996-2006, with Operation Life Nexus - The Gift, we focused on organ donation. A friend who died waiting for a heart transplant made us aware of the fact that there are thousands of deaths per year in France due to lack of organ donations – in a country that can afford solutions. The role of art in this approach is to generate workshops, actions, to awaken consciousness. Over the fifteen years and in the 40 cities in which we worked on the issue it has become adopted as a public agenda item.

The third approach is to generate broader social processes through contamination, by bringing together a wide diversity of partners from very different domains. We are not animators, but a co-ordinators of a much larger structure, instigating a whole series of processes, creating a longer lasting ripple effect.

LO An example of this was Esquela 21 (School 21), a project promoting popular education in South America. In Medellin in Colombia, together with architect Juan David Chavez we instigated a series of community workshops around the project Life Nexus. As a result of this sequence of actions a common desire emerged which was the renovation of a rural school in Palmichal. The ambitions far exceeded what we had originally intended. Together with the National Faculty of Architecture, the Bolivariana Faculty in Bogota and the local community we actually constructed the school, which is also a sculpture. It functions

as an educational machine. Marina Rothberg is currently animating a similar project in the Escuela Morena in Buenos Aires. We know that if we could mobilise more people, institutions and partners, we could develop many more schools like this.

JG In at least two of the three approaches, there seems to be an emphasis on manifesting concrete change in the world and building transformative processes of becoming - based on open, collaborative explorations of desire. This is both incredibly important and incredibly dangerous, given the current trend toward instrumentalization in public arts policy and the use of the arts within some development frameworks. In many places, these kind of measures subject socially engaged practices to highly rationalized, outcomes-based evaluative frameworks, requesting that artists do everything from bringing conflicting parties together in harmony to assuaging tensions between real estate developers and local residents. Beyond their bureaucratic excesses, what is often so problematic about such frameworks are their assumptions about what social transformation would look like. Their conceptions often neutralize, replicate and consolidate current structures of power, or pacify what might otherwise be a process of radical resistance. How do you negotiate these frameworks, and how do you register or understand the impact of your projects without beyond these controls?

JO This is something we've been thinking about quite a bit. The question for us is how do we now act in a process of real social transformation. Not within a theoretical paradigm, but through actions, not talking about transformation in the way that all of art becomes a discussion, but something concrete, sometimes even scientific, in a way that actually engages in social intervention and modification. You talk about becoming. For us, the subject (or 'cause') of the work has not been the most important thing. It is the process that is used. When a painter chooses his subject matter, it's not whether it is a still life or nude, it's the analysis. While the issues that we have chosen to work with are important, the real subject is the transformation of relationships between people. The problematic is always the same, whether someone is sleeping in street and we don't see them, or someone dies anonymously because no organ is available for them, or 1000s of thousands of children die due to lack of water, it is always social fragmentation and the lack of opportunity for collective voicing, analysis and action. It is the neglect that we've had for each other.

JG This production of disaggregated subjectivities is also a result of the way technologies of power operate. This is why working from affect to processes of group analysis seems so important in your attempts to inspire constituent power through actions and actualizations. But then again, we have the problem of how the processes are then signified. The framework for understanding the projects you describe, sounds quite different from the formal and symbolic analyses of 'relationships' that are often attributed to it by critics. How do you articulate these processes for yourselves? You used the term scientific?

JO Yes, sometimes I think you could use the same critical text for any artwork. But this brings me to the fourth approach. We try and employ a scientific methodology, which I learnt from my director of research Professor Ricardo Bruera, ex Minister of Education in Argentina. Dissatisfied with the current trend of art where anything is permitted, we try to incorporate a notion of evaluation into the processes and resulting artwork. After defining and objective or formulating a hypothesis, we then begin the stages of experimentation and development using all forms of collaboration. An objective

system of evaluation can either confirm or re-position the initial hypothesis, which means that we need to start the process all over again.

LO The Life Nexus – The Gift project taught us this lesson. It was initiated in 1996 when we began questioning people about the problem of organ donation, organ trafficking and their experience of the unnecessary deaths due to lack of information or understanding of the problem. We workshopped these issues with groups of people, sketching, painting and modelling heart forms with the participants and they would talk about organ donation and the notion of gift for life. The more the heart representations proliferated, amongst the various communities, the more people began to discuss the issue and even dialogue between each other. Doctors, heart specialists and non-profit organisations became interlocutors and interdisciplinary networks of people emerged. About 8 years into the project, cultural institutions started paying attention, many of which had been negative in the beginning. After the World Transplant Games in Nancy 2003 an external audit was conducted, to evaluate the increase in awareness of the issue of organ transplants as a result of the multiple actions we had initiated in the Meurte and Mosel region. The results were incredible, 30% more people in favour of organ donation. We realised that the only way that we could attain this depth of result was to sustain the work over time. Since then our research and projects extend over a period of 5 to 10 years minimum.

JG It's interesting that the project far exceeded its affiliation with formal arts organizations. For me, the format of the exhibition, or programme has always been difficult to reconcile with ongoing processes of social production. Have you found a way to register the experiences of participants in your gallery exhibitions? Is it important that they be understood in this context?

LO Until recently museums or galleries were not so interested in exhibiting these kinds of processes, or fully recognizing the contributions of participants, stating that it was too pedagogic. We have also refused to exhibit really significant collective work because the participatory element was not sufficiently recognised by the curatorial staff. It's a difficult negotiation that we have had to overcome as it's important that the voices of the groups have a place within the institutions, and that the productions that come out of this process are of a quality that makes them significant evidence of that process.

In the museum exhibitions, whenever we have had carte blanche from a curatorial perspective, we have included as aspects of the process, through photography, texts, recordings, web forum projections. We have made a whole range of beautiful objects to contain the tangible results of the collaborations, such as the crates, shelves, kits, vitrines or work benches (Container; Data Draw; Magic Carpet). Each of these artworks archive the collective endeavour whatever form the workshop took: drawings, moulds, objects, notes, and sound recordings. Wherever possible, the artworks have even been signed by individual members of the group.

Some of our most interesting projects have been running the workshops as part of the exhibition, actually being present to dialogue with the public visiting the show rendering totally transparent the process from all angles – 'Fluid Architecture at Stroom Centre for the Arts in The Hague; 'OrtaWater' at Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam.

JG Is this the process of 'contamination' that you described earlier? In this sense, has there been a difference between working in the context of an exhibition and working with Education Departments in galleries?

LO Working with the educational departments, outside of the exhibition environment has always been open, fluid and challenging and above all a real team endeavour. At stake are actual people and feelings, so the human factor is a prime consideration. It's obvious that static exhibitions are easier to install because curators only need to deal with inert objects. But there is a veritable new model of curating emerging with education departments playing a more critical role in the life of the work on exhibit, exhibiting more of the processes and less of the outcomes. This is what we have been searching and bargaining for over the last fifteen years.

JG I suppose here there is an issue with how we understand aesthetics. It seems as though that in these processes you are attempting to articulate a definition more akin to what theorist Suely Rolnik describes as 'mutations of the sensible' – whether they be subjectivizing affects or the kind of aesthetics that Jacques Ranciere describes as a distribution or re-distribution of what is seen/not seen, what is heard or not heard. This became really clear to me in Commune Communicate – the work that you did with prisoners, in which their recorded testimonies were taken into the street and the responses of people on the street were taken into the prison. Elsewhere, you have described an 'aesthetics of ethics'. Is this what you mean?

JO The aesthetic of ethics is a manifesto, which explores the poetics of an ethical action, through the mutation of the object's formality towards the behavioural aspects, which in turn becomes the aesthetic work. This is founded on the principle that art is a catalyst and contains a real capacity to transform. The total realisation or total aesthetic is in direct correspondence with its ethical coherence. The idea is to build and construct and build again, not to destroy. This goes beyond the intentions of traditional aesthetics, and is more involved in an ethical dynamic, which defines the artwork.

JG This dual emphasis on production and communicative transformation reminds me of Deleuze when he talks about the relationship between the wasp and the orchid, each imprinting another, so that some other form of subjectivation or subject-making process occurs. Is this how collaboration functions within your relationship with one another or do you maintain separate identities? How does this function within your relationships with other collaborators?

LO Over the years it has become very difficult to separate who did what. We are too finely woven together. The art context often wants to attribute a more defined separation to our independent practices, but eventually we hope there will be just one Orta.

JO Yes, Man/Woman, Architect/Fashion Designer, English/Argentine, Lucy/Jorge. It is, of course, much less clear. All the time we have been living, working, parenting, and being in love. This complimentary fusion is now more evident in our work.

LO With our community collaborators, the identities are more evident in the outcomes of the work, which differ from project to project. We are beginning to experiment a new collaborative methodology, where we become more removed from the participants, working closely with a team who act locally/contextually and on a more sustained level a 'franchised action'. 'Dwelling X' is an example. Director of education at Angel Row Gallery, Katy Culbard approached local Nottingham based artists Trish Bramman, Trish Evans

and Marcus Rowlands, to work on an intensive level with the community, developing the themes and working methodologies from our previous Dwelling workshops to incorporate new techniques and experimenting with new materials. The results of the process and the outcome are quite astonishing.

JO The projects become channels for all kinds and categories of emotions and needs which differ depending on each individual. We conceive of this as co-creation. We are professionals with certain competencies who are capable of guiding a process that can result in an artwork. It is a combination of vision, of poetics, of "vivencia" and techniques, which set about the process of materialization and transfer of experience.

LO This was very clear in Fluid Architecture, a project that we developed with architects, designers and theorists in Melbourne. Michael Silver from RMIT Industrial Design, proposed the idea for the Nexus strap or harness that would develop new connectivity between people, many participants expressed a profound shift in their perception of the other as a result of the process of co-creation. The methods Michael employed have been duplicated in many workshops, producing the most extraordinary experiences and artworks.

JG Materiality and the concrete are recurring themes in your work/lives. It seems, however, that you are moving toward a kind of materialism that manifests itself in the encounter (Althusser), rather than in the creation of an object per se. How are you approaching 'the future' in more recent processes (I'm thinking in particular of your creation of a series of workshops)?

Lucy + Jorge Orta

We would like to fuse the actions and the resulting artworks, the immateriality of the process and the resulting durable object, into one in dissociable whole.

Now that the museums are absorbing the processes, it's time to move on together. We can no longer be present in all the different places at one time, work with so many communities simultaneously, we have tested different collaborative methodologies including even simultaneous online workshops and the new 'franchise actions'. Now it's time to consolidate our energies, think of a new long-distance collective way of working that is even more focused than before. Huge endeavours are to be overcome and to accomplish them we need to exceed the simple Lucy + Jorge actions. We are constantly experimenting a way of building this common energy, to become veritable catalysts. We would like to become active agents in a world that we are all dreaming of.

Janna Graham is an organizer, writer, researcher, educator, curator, negotiator, and chronic collaborator. Experimenting with modes of public participation, knowledge formulation and instituent mischief, her current investigations explore the acoustics of administration, participatory organizing methods and radical relationship making. During her eight years at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto she developed exhibitions and programming in collaboration with artists, youth and community organizers. Recent projects include: Ultra-red, SILENT|LISTEN at the International AIDS Conference, Artcirq II, a residency and exhibition with an Inuit performance//video circus collective at Project Art Centre in Dublin, The Ambulator: or what happens when we take questions for a walk (with Susan Kelly and Valeria Graziano), in the exhibition, Academy: Learning from the Museum, Vanabmuseum. Other collaborators include: Mercer Union Contemporary Art Centre and FUSE Magazine (Toronto), 16beavergroup (New York), debajehmujig theatre (Wiwemikong). Her musings on art, culture and how to inhabit cultural institutions otherwise have been published in Canada and the UK. She is currently a founding member of the Committee for Radical Diplomacy, a member of the collective Ultra-red and a PhD Candidate/tutor at Goldsmiths College in London.