Cells are a part of the human body; they are at the origin of its being, its feelings, its emotions, and its sufferings. Thus, they speak the language of the body.

There are also cells of habitation. The relationship between people and their habitat is formed in this metaphorical cell. Living and being become a single and unique life experience.

Cristina Morozzi, Potential Architecture, explores artists Lucy + Jorge Orta’s recent architectural endeavors that derive from their fascination with cell biology and the process of differentiation. Through drawings and sculptures, the artists conceptualize the communication process the human cell undertakes from its embryonic state, and the infinite transformations that lead to defined structural organisms.

This new body of work draws from Lucy + Jorge Orta’s artistic practice, grounded in the universal concerns of community, shelter, migration, and sustainable development. Potential Architecture is a powerful rejoinder to the arbitrary boundaries that define art, architecture, and design.
LUCY + JORGE ORTA

Potential Architecture

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Potential Architecture
A large, inhabitable sculpture with a cellular organic form rises from the grass of the Corso Tazzoli public park facing the Fiat Mirafiori car manufacturing plant in Turin.

This is a meeting place, the realization of a wish made by a group of “patrons,” in this case students from two neighborhood schools. An “atoll,” a “kind of free port,” in their words. Lucy + Jorge Orta propose Totipotent Architecture: beginning with a stem cell—the unit of unlimited potential that presides over the construction of an entire organism—the artists have created a metaphor of a space for social interaction that changes according to how it is used. This potential is illustrated by the imprints of the students’ bodies: casts made in aluminum and then sunk into the sculpture’s three cement steps. Hands, shoes, backs, and buttocks all make up a series of ghost figures on the surface, inviting whomever climbs onto the sculpture to take a position that encourages nearness and contact.

By the time it was inaugurated in spring 2007, the work had already become a household name in Turin. Some called it the “armadillo,” while to others it was known as the “iron mask,” or the “spaceship.” Each name derives from how the sculpture looks from a given point of view, a particular way of contemplating and imagining it. I like to perceive it as the result of an act of familiarity, of tension in identifying the places that take space away from apathy and make it part of a mental geography as a premise to the various forms of inhabiting.

Patronage for this work began in 2003 with a debate involving the student patrons and cultural mediators on how public space relates to young people; on the various forms of accessibility, belonging, and exclusion; and on the issues of visibility and safety. The patrons’ answer was to create something different from what the neighborhood already had in terms of places for young people to meet. First and foremost this difference consisted of the idea of a “transversal” area that, instead of the functions of recreation, play, sport, and creativity, would offer potential to a community or to a tribe of users, a group of people who, by their actions time after time, could contribute to redefining its sense. Projected onto the scene of urban
life, marked as it is by far-reaching change and its transformation by the media into a constant state of alarm, was a call for a place of interrelating, far from any nostalgia for a lost community and aware of the risks of producing something closed and exclusive.

Entrusted with the project in 2004, Orta developed these issues with the patrons by listening and exchanging views—an approach that marks the procedural and participatory nature of all their projects, leading up to a sculpture that combines being a sculpture with being a device. A “monument” against the idea of standardization, rubber-massified stamping, or the formatting of behavior patterns in precodified ways, times, and places, but still an example of fluid architecture, which by its sinuosity of line can adapt to the many ways of social exchange and take shape with them as a catalyst for community practices. It is the never-ending process of communication and exchange that presides over how our body cells develop, their progressive specialization as individual vital functions. This provides the artists with the metaphorical scenario of a social organism that stems from the coming together of different entities, their creative energy, and cooperation among them. It is the first example of a public work in the Totipotent Architecture series, a cycle of works for which research into social architecture developed from the Refuge Wear series (1992–1998)—mobile, temporary architectures that envelop and protect the body—and Nexus Architecture (from 1993)—connective systems ranging from the individual to the broader context of the socio-urban context.

The house is the body
Refuge Wear, Body Architecture, Modular Architecture, Nexus Architecture, Totipotent Architecture.

In the progressive augmentation of scale, from apparel to architecture urban planning, from singularity to plurality, the body is the constant, indispensable yardstick for redefining the relationship between the individual and his or her surroundings from the standpoint of measuring artistic practice against the most burning social, humanitarian, and environmental issues that afflict the global reality of this late-modern age.

Heidegger’s assumption “man is insofar as he dwells” can be interpreted as a natural right that needs a place to manifest itself, not merely the occupation of a territory. Orta returns our attention to this fundamental right of the subject that is both biological and political, beginning with the plight of the homeless, the refugees, the outcasts—who have lost the link to a territory and the sense of belonging to it. The home shrinks, it clings to the body like a second skin. A costume-refuge that reclaims space, opening up to be a tent, shifting the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, and—in the multiple or modular declination of single living units—placing the individual in coexistence with the collective—the personal and the shared (Body Architecture, Modular Architecture). The high-tech fabrics and the visually strong design in this and the later series work as a screen and interface to protect the body from the environment; they provide a refuge, they are home and indicators of a presence. Intertwoven with symbols, images, and phrases, and conceived in cooperation with their intended beneficiaries, they enhance the communicative power, providing the frame within which the individual narratives can manifest. “Me, I’ve got a lot to say,” said one of the participants during one of the first workshops run by the artists. This has become the paradigmatic opening line of a speech that blends philosophical, scientific, and political thought with common language and, through being visible, takes on a new assertive force. A visibility that Lucy + Jorge Orta extend to the whole social body by means of the connective systems of Nexus Architecture.

Beginning with the repetition of every acquired custom and idea brought on by states of crisis or emergency—a sign of today’s reality and a resounding manifestation of the common conditions of town living, such as isolation, the feeling of social distance, and rootlessness—the artists supply an essential interpretation of the concept of home, no longer a defined place in space but the existential condition of being in space, now only mediated by the body and by how it relates to other human beings. From the suit of clothes to the tent, to the temporary village, the shift happens in the passage from the isolated individual to his binding himself to other pivotal individuals. The accessories to this link function as ‘doors and bridges’ that enable people to unite and separate, making them simultaneously independent and interdependent. Bodies congregate in living units (Body Architecture) or stretch through space, all linked together (Nexus Architecture). As Paul Virilio wrote on Lucy Orta’s practice, “at a time when we are told that men are free, emancipated, totally autonomous, she tells us that, on the contrary, there is a threat and that man is regrouping...the warmth of one gives warmth to the other. The physical link weaves a social link.”

The constituent meaning of this relation can be traced back to the concept of “being a plural singular,” a concept formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy as a principle of co-essence that “has its very essence in the stroke, in the hyphen stroke which is also separator stroke, a stroke that divides.” According to Nancy, from Rousseau to Nietzsche, from Marx to Heidegger, ‘the investigation into being arrives at ’we are’ as a way of expressing the being that
overturns the meaning and the syntax of ontology turning it into a ‘sociality.’” In this sense, “the combination of singulars is singularity ‘itself’, it assembles the singulars only insofar as it spaces them, and ‘links’ them only insofar as it does not unify them.” The nature of the Mirafiori Nord “atoll house” is in accord with this co-essence. From the singular plural dynamics that tell of its des
tiny of being a place to meet, the totipotent social architecture embraces many of the issues that we have already looked into: protection, visibility, identity, and, above, all utopia.

Totipotent Architecture – Atoll responds to a request for visibility and quality aesthetics. It “marks” the surroundings and helps to redesign them by the language of art. It works like a “presence marker” in a neighborhood that typifies urban periphery, a frame for the new narratives by which each and every person can tell his or her story and see each other beyond the stereotypes by which they are talked about and looked at. In the “atoll” identity is played out on various levels and in a variety of forms. As we have said, the sculpture is a frame and a stage for the people of the neighborhood, especially the young who attend school or live in the council houses at the edge of the park. Despite being a rosy organism and sensitive to use, the Atoll does not set out to be virgin terri
tory. Its surface is “historicized” by traces: forms of seated or reclining bodies, alone or set along-
side one another, nearby or brushing each other, turned to face the houses, the sky, or the flow of cars beyond the curtain of trees. The imprint of the bodies gives an indicative sign, a clue; Lucy + Jorge Orta responded to the patrons’ wish to leave their signature, record a role, a commitment, and a feel
ing of pride in its outcome. The artists’ proposal is the result of the quest for an alternative to the name as a means of expressing identity. Entrusted to the body imprint, the “signature” becomes sensi
tive to its changes over time—the body grows and gets old, clothes change with fashions and as the demands of self-representation change. The mold allows identity to emerge like a territory open and undergoing transformation, beginning with its unshakeable unity. The imprint, however, is also a void, a shape to be filled by gestures—those of children who use them to play-cook stews of grass, leaves, and nuts that have fallen from the trees, and those who are prompted in play by the posi
tions and lower themselves into the intimacy of someone else’s body.

The empty clothes installed in the exhibition spaces, the unpopulated tents and villages, and the uninhabited atoll are all metaphors for an ideal community, a timeless, placeless dream, both poetic and melancholic. However by treating the object work as prototypes and the sculptures as architecture, the artists open a functional, accessible presence ready for use around them. Lucy Orta speaks of “Functional Utopia,” a theoreti
cal operative declination of the return to utopias with which Jorge Orta drafted his Manifesto for the Third Millennium in 1994. A possibility of being which they “set up” through urban initiatives and performances, and even beforehand in the spirit of cooperation and coauthoring that they adopt in all their projects with workshops, discus
sion forums, and with the contemporary contribu
tion of a variety of social and professional actors (from local government to schoolchildren, the world of academia, and scientific and technologi
cal research, to shelters for the homeless, émigré families, and the inhabitants of an entire village).

The live presence of bodies that move united with each other (Nexus) or adjacent when not envel
oped in a single structure lined up in formations (Connector) ooze a “constituent” power or, in the words of activism, given as visualizations of empowerment make an ideal space real. Rather than offering answers to the problems of our soci
eity, Orta’s work raises issues and opens debate extending it to the greatest number of people. Instead of an instruction booklet the artists leave clues like the imprints in the Atoll, archaeological remains pointing to the future, both an inner place for the self and a way of inhabiting the world.

Totipotent Architecture – Atoll was realized within the New Patrons program of the Fondazione de France, promoted in Italy by the Adriano Olivetti Foundation. The project was curated by the collec
tive a.titolo (project managers: Giorgina Bertolino and Francesca Comizzo) and took place in the Mirafiori Nord neighborhood in Turin as part of the “Urban 2” urban regeneration program promoted and funded by the European Commission.

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2. Echoing George Simmel’s thoughts on human beings Andrew Patrizio brings his concept of “door and bridge” to recorded rep
tions Jean-Michel Place, 1995).
Fabrication process of aluminium body casts and concrete base
Totipotent Architecture - Atoll, 2004-07
Detail of concrete base with aluminium body casts
Potential Architecture
Nexus Bridge, Lee Bank Middleway, Birmingham
Potential Architecture
Cellular Units, Cité du Design, Saint-Etienne
ELEcTIoNS s
and has been the subject of numerous (2012); and MAXXI National Museum of XXI Cen-
and the Antarctic Peninsula (2007); Hangar Bicocca, Beijing, San Gimignano, and Le Moulin (2007–8); Galleria Continua, Gallery, London (2005); Fondazione Bevilacqua Weiner Secession, Vienna (1999); Barbican Art
as staged ephemeral interventions and perfor-
sich screen, photography, video, and light, as well as staged ephemeral interventions and perfor-
ences. Their work has been the focus of major solo exhibitions at the Venice Biennale (1995); Weiner Secession, Vienna (1999); Barbican Art
Bologna: Damiani, 2012; Fabulae Romanae. Venice: Mar-

| 70 x 7 The Meal act XX.VIII. Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild, Cap Ferrat, Monaco
| OrtaWater. Expo Zaragoza 2008, Austrian Pavilion, Spain

Survival: Fashion Space Gallery, London College of Fashion, United Kingdom

2007
Antarctic Village—No Borders. Galleria Continua: San Gimignano, Italy
Antarctic Village—No Borders. Antartic Peninsula, Antarctica
Heads or Tails, Tails or Heads. Antarctic Marambio Base, Antarctica

Fallujah—works in progress. Galerie Peter Kliuchmann, Zurich, Switzerland
Fallujah. Institute of Contemporary Art / Old Truman Brewery, London, United Kingdom
Fallujah—Casey’s Pawns. 11th Prague Quadrennial International Exhibition of Scenography and Theatre Architecture, Czech Republic

Fallujah. Art Forum Berlin / Motive Gallery, Germany
Fallujah—Aescualp 01. Context Festival, Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin, Germany
70 x 7 The Meal, act XXVII. Albion Gallery, London, United Kingdom

Nexus Architecture. Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland

2006
OrtaWater. Galleria Continua: Beijing, China


Solo
2013
Food Water Life. Zilka Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, United States

Meteoors | Clouds. Terrace Wines, Barkley Shed, St Panza’s International Station, London, United Kingdom
70 x 7 The Meal act XXXIV. Philadelphia, PA, United States of America

Spirit of the Huveaune | Le Chemin des Fees. Marseille-Provence, France
Clouds. Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Leeds, United Kingdom

Tootopent Architecture. The Gallery, Arts University Bournemouth, Bournemouth, United Kingdom

2012
Lilama | Fantastique Creature. Lille 3000, Lille Town Hall, France
Fabulae Romanae. MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo, Rome, Italy

Food, Water, Light. Tufts University Art Gallery, Addikman Arts Center, Medford, Massachusetts, United States
70 x 7 The Meal act XXXIII. Smiths Row, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, United Kingdom

2011
Clouds | Nuages. La Marchelaine — centre d’art contemporain, L’ecole nationale supérieure d’architecture de Versailles et la Gypsothèque du Musée du Louvre, France
Amazonia. Motive Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland

70 x 7 The Meal act XXVII. MAXXI Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo, Rome, Italy

BIOGRAPHY

Lucy + Jorge Orta
www.studio-orta.com

Lucy + Jorge Orta’s collaborative practice draws upon ecological and social sustainability issues to create artworks employing a diversity of mediums, including drawing, sculpture, costume, painting, silkscreen, photography, video, and light, as well as staged ephemeral interventions and performances. Their work has been the focus of major solo exhibitions at the Venice Biennale (1995); Weiner Secession, Vienna (1999); Barbican Art Gallery, London (2005); Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice (2005), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2006); Galleria Continua, Beijing, San Gimignano, and Le Moulin (2007–8); and MAXXI National Museum of XXI Century Arts, Rome (2012).


Lucy Orta was born in 1966 in Sutton Coldfield, United Kingdom. After graduating with an honors degree in fashion-knitwear design from Nottingham Trent University in 1989, Lucy began practicing as a visual artist in Paris in 1991. Lucy was the head of Man and Humanity, a pioneering master’s program that stimulates socially driven and sustainable design, which she cofounded at the Design Academy in Eindhoven in 2002. She is currently Professor of Art and the Environment at the University of the Arts London.

Jorge Orta was born in 1953 in Rosario, Argentina. He studied simultaneously at the faculty of fine arts (1972–79) and the faculty of architecture (1973–80) of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Jorge was a lecturer in the faculty of fine arts of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario and a member of CONICET, the Argentinian national council for scientific research, until 1984, when he received a scholarship from the French Ministry of Foreign and European affairs to pursue a D.E.A. (Diplôme d’études approfondies) at the Sorbonne University in Paris.

Lucy + Jorge Orta’s studios are located in central Paris and at Les Moulins in Seine-et-Marne. Les Moulins is a not-for-profit cultural regeneration project founded by the artists in 2000 with a mission to transform the former industrial heritage sites along the Grand Morin River valley. These include: La Laiterie, the first industrial dairy in the region; the Moulin de Boissy, and the Moulin Sainte-Marie, two former paper mills of national historical significance.
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This is America? Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Holland
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The Fashion of Architecture. Center for Architecture, New York, United States
Dark Places. The Santa Monica Museum of Art, California, United States

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Five Rings: Ornaments of Suffering. Fort of Exilles, Piedmont, Italy
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2002 Connector Body Architecture. Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, United Kingdom
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2001 Mobile Village: Plag in. Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Germany
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Publications Selection