

Title, Refuge Wear

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Living without shelter for prolonged periods rapidly deteriorates physical and moral health. The lack of adequate sleep increases stress, weakens the immune system and accelerates the loss of identity and desocialisation."

So reads the bold text on one of the Refuge Wear, which Lucy Orta presented at the Salvation Army in Paris, in 1993. The bright blue sleeping bag, trimmed in fuchsia, is made out of microporous polyester that "breathes" like a second skin. Its foot section is printed with the colour-reversed image of a pair of bare feet, a fragment of an image of a person crouched on the ground, begging. This section can then be unzipped from the rest of the sleeping bag, resulting in a heavy-duty duffel bag on one part, and a warm, pull-over jacket on the other.

This project marks the beginning of Lucy Orta's career as an artist. She was inspired to create her first "Body Architecture" after thinking about the needs of Kurdish refugees in Iraq at the time of the Gulf War, and she realized instantly that the portable housing she had in mind held a poetic significance for any displaced or migrant people, including the homeless on the streets of Paris, where she lives. People who are forced to travel by foot, by day or by night, with little food or water security and little excess energy for carrying their belongings, would need a structure that could minimise weight and maximise versatility. Visible and hidden pockets might hold water, food and papers. A small brick stove, such as the kind used for outdoor camping, could serve as an easy and energy-efficient means of cooking meals.

When the Cité de Refuge de l'Armée du Salut — Paris's 13th district Salvation Army hostel — decided to stage an exhibition of site-specific works by young artists, Orta submitted her Refuge Wear. Cité de Refuge (City of Refuge) was the name given to this Salvation Army building by its designer, the famous French architect Le Corbusier. The building itself is one of the first large attempts at modern, self-consciously "social" architecture, and the show fell on the 60th anniversary of its construction. In recent years, however, Le Corbusier's colourful, rigidly symmetrical building had proved awkward in meeting the needs of its clients — its immense scale and boxy, compartmentalized structure no longer functioned efficiently in light of the new kinds of programs and therapies that the Salvation Army offers. According to Denis Lebaillif "We have to find a way out of the problem frequently brought about by the maladjustment of people in order to understand that often the structures themselves are also maladjusted to the people taken in". Other Refuge Wear items from this show include a "Mobile Cocoon" made of polar fleece and quilted microfibre, for cold-weather wear. This "Cocoon" functions as both sleeping bag and full-body parka (known in Canada as a "Skidoo Suit"). The sleeping bag can be unzipped from groin to feet and re-zipped in different way, providing full pants with attached boots. Attached arms and mittens can be tucked away while sleeping, and the pointed, cocoon-shaped pillow area doubles as a hood.

Orta staged an intervention of her Refuge Wear inside the Salvation Army and in nearby subway entrances. Here, Paul Virilio stumbled across them. He explains: "They immediately interested me by their pertinence ... Art is one of the elements of a world vision and this relationship with the world is a constantly-changing one". The street, in which Orta's work was situated, is "where this relationship changes the most". Lodgers at the Cité de Refuge, who had spent considerable time living on the streets, were also excited by the structures. They tried them on and explained to Orta the advantages and drawbacks of each design. Certain items from the outfits — including all of the brick stoves — disappeared overnight, a sign to Orta that she was at least partially on the right track. But one lodger, who agreed that Refuge Wear could be very useful, lamented: "If only this was all we needed". JB