

Title, Process of Transformation

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Lucy Orta's work bridges architecture and street theatre, fashion design and social conscience, poetry and activism. Beginning with *Refuge Wear*, constructed in response to the graphic images of Kurdish refugees during the US invasion of Iraq, Orta has been building sculpture in the form of prototype solutions for urban emergencies and natural catastrophes since 1992. Moved by ideas of collective action and public debate, she has collaborated with shelters, prisons, foster homes, universities and highschools. Her work aims to draw attention to issues of public welfare that fail to meet the media's imagination, and also to elaborate, in sustained contact with smaller, often marginalized communities, an ethics of and a context for care and development, largely through explorations of the body in relationship to clothing, architecture and the environment.

Refuge Wear was realized as temporary, portable, multi-use shelter : a thermal sleeping bag by night converts into an anorak and rucksack by day. Pockets are made to hold metaphorical and utilitarian objects : water supplies, food, portable stoves and documents. An attached whistle can be used by the wearer to call for assistance when under threat and acts as a metaphor for life's precariousness. Orta's training as a fashion/textile designer led her to find high-tech solutions for her creations, whose fabrics are microporous, waterproof and insulated. In later work, flexible carbon structures provide light-weight support for tents and semi-tents, which stave off claustrophobia and create spaces for personal development. Orta's work is not just practical engineering. Her designs are as expressive as they are potentially useful, as fantastic as they are probable. A modular tent from Nexus Architecture might boast five dangling heads (hoods) and ten hands (five pairs of gloves). Five jackets by day, at night the tent becomes a symbol for something else. To paraphrase the American artist Vito Acconci : no "Self" is asserted in nature's face when one finds shelter under an overhang or in a cardboard box ; likewise, no "Self" asserts itself in the face of the passer-by.¹ The protruding hoods and gloves of Orta's tents (protruding heads and hands) attest to various "Selves" within a made structure that one would otherwise assume to be found, accidental, something to be safely ignored. Passers-by can read camaraderie and willpower in the shelter. It becomes a symbol of community, or better, the sign of a new community growing independently within the larger one that regularly displaces its own members.

Orta's designs are strangely anthropomorphic : the French urbanist Paul Virilio has described them as "characters", claiming : "When I see her characters ... I think of the painter (Hieronymous) Bosch. When Bosch depicts Hell, he does not illustrate scenes of horror and massacre ; he presents characters in strange situations, people who live in fruit, wrapped in a lemon... It is a description of bodies linked to niches, solitary. For those about whom Lucy Orta speaks, today's street is Hell".² Experiments with mobile architecture and discussions with dispossessed people in Paris brought Orta to understand that a roof solves only some of the problems for those living in refugee camps, church lodgings or rehabilitation centres. The dispossession that denies a person a home also denies that person participation in the culture surrounding them, and thus a sense of belonging or identity. So Orta began a series of Identity Workshops, which later led to the founding of *Collective Wear*. Her workshops began in 1993 at the Salvation Army in Paris, whose creations travelled later to a Salvation Army in New York City. Later, she extended her questioning of isolation to develop further workshops with inmates at the Metz prison, children in the Arc-en-Ciel foster home and, more recently, unemployed migrant labourers from a women's shelter in Johannesburg. These workshops stressed story-telling and self-expression through the design of postcards, clothing and architecture. Attention was paid both to the collaborative process within each group and to the assertion of individual desire through choice-making and the declaration of personal preferences. Finally, every workshop culminated in the presentation of collective statements or questions in the larger public arena. Similar to the late Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, Orta uses clothing, textiles and objects to facilitate and initiate an individual's exploration of his or her own body as well as physical contact and co-operation with others. Participants in workshops have rethought the body by creating a skirt out of a multiplicity of belts, or a dress out of dozens of ties. And, similar to the way that Clark's "Roupa corpo-roupa" functioned as a "second skin", outfits designed for two wearers to investigate each other's bodies through a number of openings and vents, Orta's Nexus Architecture and *Collective Wear* — clothing and structures designed to hold up to 30 people at a time — have been used as an experiment with physical sensations of touch and explore movement within shared spaces. Dancers at the Cartier Foundation also demonstrated the numerous sensual possibilities of Nexus Architecture. All *Collective Wear* encourages touch between wearer and wearer, and demonstrates that the limits of a person do not end at the outermost layer of skin.

Orta's work incorporates texts, symbols and colours composed for street-level communication. With her husband, Argentinian artist Jorge Orta, Lucy Orta has compiled an extensive archive of signs and symbols, including : pictograms, meta-social signs (images removed from context), object signs, textual and sound signs a language capable of speaking upon various levels to and from various people or social groups. Clothing and architecture may be silkscreen printed with signs and images of compasses or ropes, photos of refugees, texts from current newspaper headlines or quotes from famous authors. A series of Survival Kits — "Bags for the Street" — are inscribed with : "Si c'était que ça!" and "Life Line". They are silkscreen printed with hands clutching each other, or hands begging for scoops of rice. The colours Orta chooses for her designs are equally as vibrant, as if to alert the on-looker or wearer to the intrinsic heat and light of life — similar to the intense colours the other Brazilian artist, Hélio Oiticica, used for his relational, participatory "Bóides" or "Trans-objects".

In more recent works, Orta has turned her attention to alternative systems, such as those of food distribution, public opinion polls and lobbying. Bernard Tschumi's Folley Architecture in the Villette Park inspired a new Mobile Architecture, the Citizen Platform, for collecting and voicing opinions on environmentalism. According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the structure of Tschumi's red metal cubic Follies provides occasion "for chance, formal invention, combined transformation, wandering"³ - i.e. opportunity. Orta re-invented the folies in a wheeled structure that challenged and stimulated the park's visitors about their feelings towards everyday environmental actions such as recycling. In another project, images of French farmers dumping tonnes of fruit onto highways in protest against European Union quota laws brought Orta to the Les Halles market place where she organised a free open buffet from discarded produce, cooked by Stohrer, a renowned Parisian chef. She also sold small jars of jams and preserves made from fruit she had gathered from the streets at the end of market day. These were displayed within reliquaries in the form of miniature transformed fruit crates.

The latter actions are reminiscent of efforts by artists like the American Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who brought public attention to issues of sanitation by choreographing a waterfront "dance" of garbage trucks and by panelling garbage trucks in chrome — a poetic act is used to enhance a mundane subject. The food project is also similar to Suzanne Lacy's "Whisper, the Waves, the Wind", in which 154 women age 65 plus were invited to a ritual dinner to discuss ageing, women's changing roles, physical beauty and related topics. In Orta's case, the participatory, collective act of eating together — the oldest and most common bonding experience — enabled "drop-in" participants to more comfortably, and naturally, discuss and reflect upon the problems of food distribution, food quality and hunger. At the same time, through eating, attention to the body's need for nourishment and fulfillment was once again brought to the fore. Empathy — her own and her participants' - drives the experience of Orta's work. In societies where ideas of community and solidarity are deteriorating on every level, her actions assert the pre-eminence and the necessity, of group bonds. Despite her profound optimism, Orta's work also serves as a manifesto or "packaging" - like "sandwich-board advertising", says Virilio - disturbing and warning against social breakdown on an even larger scale, threatening everyone who accepts the present, frequently disguised emergency state of affairs. Much of her work shares the bold graphic quality of the poster campaigns and pamphleteering that came to characterize much of the public art known as "Activist Art" in the late 80s and early 90s in the U.S.A. (such as by Gran Fury, Group Material or Barbara Kruger). However Orta's approach is entirely different, in that each project she undertakes she makes direct contact with others and does her best to leave behind new, permanent infrastructures such as recycling programs, creative, paid work projects for the unemployed or a curriculum for "Body Works" in schools. While governmental and charitable institutions continue to devote themselves to cost-efficiency and "turn-around", her projects emphasize patience and close attention to detail whilst working with people from all sectors of society.

Lucy Orta's work brings art back into the realm of the everyday, back into ritual, healing and the body. It is a type of modern cave-painting where each person carries his own cave upon his back, urban bivouacs or teepees whose residents know every niche and the many ways a body can fit and move inside. Or it is advertising with nothing to sell, only many questions to pose, a call to revolution with no manifesto : an art designed not to implant ideas but to trigger an endless series of ideas in others, ideas that the artist cannot predict or plan for. Orta seeks to produce transformations in ways that others have attempted in the past, not through slogans, but through intimate, often physical contact and voluntary participation. This makes it the rarest of projects today : a patient art that evolves along with its on-lookers and users. JB

1 Vito Acconci, Notes on Making a Shelter, April 1985 (revised 1988) and Projections of Home, January 1988, from the exhibition catalogue at il Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Prato, Italy, in 1982.

2 Paul Virilio, Urban Armour, from Lucy Orta-Refuge Wear, Paris, Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1996.

3 Jacques Derrida, Point de Folie — Maintenant Architecture, (trans. Kate Linker) from AAFiles, no.12, summer 1986.