

**Title, Urban Armour**

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**Observations on the work of Lucy Orta recorded during an interview in December 1995. First published in Refuge Wear editions Jean-Michel Place Paris 1996. ISBN 9 782858 932726**

I was first attracted to the work of Lucy Orta because of its situational nature. The problem of art today is one of delocalisation. Art is no longer found in galleries and museums ; it is found where ever-changing social situations condense. Art is one of the elements of a world vision and this relationship with the world is a constantly-changing one. I first came across Lucy Orta's work where this relationship changes the most - in the street. I witnessed protective sleeping bags and survival kits, in the street and also at the Salvation Army. They immediately interested me by their pertinence.

Lucy's work is an appeal to take on board a new relationship with the body. I recall that art has its origins in the body : dance and theatre, war-paint and tattoos. Lucy Orta's work struck me as a style of rock painting inscribed on the body. Enveloped in Lucy's overalls, the being bears witness to the threat towards the body. This threat is linked not only to problems of unemployment and precariousness, factors which, as an architect, interest me a lot, but also to the drowning of the body in virtuality, to the creation of clones, and to a remote intimacy. Lucy's collective wear reminds me of collective body practices which exist in the world of survival. The survival of most animals depends on running with the pack. The concept of the pack is linked to animality. Lucy's collective wear represents a denunciation of man's return to the pack. 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. We refer to this new phenomenon in terms of gangs, new tribes, commandos.

Each individual keeps an eye on, and protects, the other. One individual's life depends on the life of the other. In Lucy's work, the warmth of one gives warmth to the other. The physical link weaves a social link. Revealed here are signs ; symptoms which contradict the myth of comfort and also the desire to preserve the body, to save it from solitude and from death in solitude. I believe that Lucy's work can never be separated from the threat of regression that it invokes. Behind the innovation of the Nexus Architecture, overalls designed to protect from a real social threat, there is, at the same time, a sense of novelty and a fear of regression ; a tragedy and a dramatic art form.

I think that, if Lucy Orta was welcomed by the Salvation Army, it was because her work gave birth to something else, above and beyond her art : the societal dimension. Her work corresponds to a disintegration of society. She is designing collective wear at a time when divorces are on the increase. It is a sort of marriage via clothes, designed to prevent people from tearing themselves apart. It is extraordinary that, at a time when single-parent families are becoming the norm, Lucy Orta is designing collective wear where parents and children wear the same garment. This is like a metaphor symptomatic of the state of society. For this reason, her work is more societarian than humanitarian. Even if these clothes can help to save people, their main task is to warn of social breakdown - social divorce.

It is important not to forget that there are currently five hundred million homeless people in the world. On the one hand, there are five hundred million homeless to whom the most important question is where to live, and on the other hand there is a society which is breaking down and where families are falling apart. The problem is no longer one of divorce and remarriage but of what are already being referred to as "non-cohabiting couples", "NCN's " ; in other words, people who get married but who, rather than living together, live separately. We can see here the signs of a precariousness which is no longer that of the unemployed or the abandoned, but that of individuals socially alone. Lucy Orta denounces a situation of social disintegration which she reveals via her projects but which they will not cure, even if a sleeping bag can act as an emergency stopgap. However, she operates on a different level. When I see her characters, which is what her clothes are to me, I think of the painter Jerome 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.

There is a prophetic dimension in her work. The realistic aspect is less important than the prophetic aspect. Another aspect of Lucy Orta's work is linked to the question of packaging. It is an acknowledged fact that our society has a packaging mentality which goes hand in hand with marketing and mobility. Packaging has a dual role ; its prime role is to facilitate transport, and its secondary role is to facilitate the message. In Lucy Orta's work, clothes are no longer perceived as a mere covering close to the body, as a second skin, but also as a form of packaging, in other words, half-way between architecture and dress. We know that there are several skins : underwear, the clothes themselves, the overcoat. We could continue this onion-layer approach by saying that after the overcoat there is the sleeping bag, that after the sleeping bag comes the tent, that after the tent comes the container ... Lucy's clothes emancipate themselves, expand to try to become a house, a pneumatic raft ... The garment becomes more than mere clothing ; it is a vehicle, a survival vehicle certainly but also a vehicle which protects against anonymity. Furthermore, like packaging, these clothes are covered with text. Their new role is to convey information. Sandwich men used to advertise, but here the message is of a different nature. Lucy Orta's work seeks to disturb us, to attract us inexorably, like packaging attracts customers, towards problems that are continually avoided nowadays.

The second-hand clothes transformation workshop which Lucy Orta set up at the Salvation Army reminds me of certain creative writing workshops. People who no longer know how to write come to plunge themselves into an account of their life. They are given a pencil and they are told : « describe your situation. Try, it doesn't matter if you make mistakes, write, describe your situation, describe it using the pen ». Social workers manage to gain these people's loyalty ; both immigrant workers and French nationals who rediscover themselves by writing their history, by writing it literally, and sometimes on pages and pages. As soon as they are no longer obstructed by the literary form, they manage to say things and reconstruct for themselves a psychology through the therapy of writing. It seems to me that Lucy is doing something similar via couture. Look at the famous paintings analysed by Heidegger : Van Gogh Boots. Where did these boots come from ; did Van Gogh collect them from the street ? We know that a coat hanging on a peg or an abandoned pair of shoes can tell us much about the person who wore them.

Similarly, it appears to me that the artistic work carried on in Lucy's transformation workshops does something similar ; a therapy based on a garment means that the garment is no longer an article designed to keep one warm, it tells a story. Lucy Orta's work is not expressionist, it is a manifesto. It speaks to us with truth and candour.

Paul Virilio is the author of numerous publications including *Speed and Politics* (Semiotext(e), 1986), *The Vision Machine* (Indiana University Press, 1994), and *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (Semiotext(e), 1991)