

Title, A discussion with artist Lucy Orta

Interview by Christabel Stewart | Curatorial Projects Director SHOWstudio

Also on line @ www.showstudio.com

C.S.: Your initial training was as a fashion designer. Could you describe how you first became interested in clothing and textiles?

L.O.: Usual suspect: back to childhood, with a dominant domestic mother and style crazy grandmother. I distinctly remember my first homemade outfit, a lilac tartan pinafore kilt! Followed by a collection of mail order do-it-yourself kits, Clothkits I believe they were called, garment blocks printed onto various cotton fabrics ready to assemble. Very 'eco', and probably as avant-garde as the Margiela pattern you are proposing for Design_Download. Living in Paris as a teenager influenced my decision to gravitate towards fashion, but I came across knitwear design by accident, and this is the fashion training I actually specialized in.

C.S.: You have stated that you have never designed 'fashion' clothing, yet you hold the prestigious Rootstein Hopkins Chair of Fashion at the London College of Fashion. How do you differentiate your approach to design, from the creativity of designers within the fashion world?

L.O.: The biggest advantage I have is that I do not need to promote a 'brand', although you could probably argue that this is virtually impossible in today's society. I certainly do not have to worry about seasons, orders, production line or delivery... This leaves me a large scope for experimentation with no imperatives other than an intense belief that art has a powerful role to play in today's society and making sure that conceptually, aesthetically, spiritually, and ethically it has something to social, ecological, or even political to convey. I think that creative process is not dissimilar to certain designers who conduct extensive thematic research, spend time developing fabrics or finishes, and innovate in pattern cutting and assemblage methods. However, the results of my work do not need to withstand wear-ability, although notions of mobility are essential to the work that can be worn.

C.S.: You talk of an 'infinite field of research, far more advanced than fashion and clothing design' based on advancements in fibre and textile design. Can you tell us a bit more about these developments, and how you have applied them?

L.O.: In the early 90's I began working with a research group TexTec who were sourcing new design outputs for geotextiles and fabrics developed for the security and hospital industries. I had been developing new fibre blends in my job at I.W.F.O. (International Wool Fashion Office, Woolmark), so the transition into new textile domains was a natural research process. We archived prototype textiles developed by chemical research industries: specialised fibre knits five times more heat conserving than wool, biodegradable weaves, glass, carbon coated, ceramic, microfilaments, etc. The technical specifications, combined with the potential applications of the fabrics were infinite and incredibly inspiring. I began drawing and creating poetic proposals in the form of Refuge Wear. For example, fabrics that change colour according to temperature fluctuations contribute immensely to the multi-layered meaning of the artworks: a sleeping bag-like cocoon with a detachable baby carrier was created with paraffin molecules integrated into fibres which conserve and release heat when needed, allowing the baby unit to communicate with the mother. By the mid-90's fashion trends were becoming increasingly interested in these developments and I was invited to select and exhibit the most technical fabrics for Premier Vision's 'Future Forum'. To my surprise the most innovative fabrics available from the top

international textile companies were very basic coatings, membranes, weaves and micro fibres. Although the research climate has changed and it is now possible to develop many extreme fabrics commercially, there is a tremendous need to link research and development to design, especially in the field of nanotechnology and so-called intelligent textiles.

C.S.: Your early 'refuge wear' has been described as 'portable architecture'. Has it been used in actual situations of survival, or is it symbolic in its suggestion of use-value?

L.O.: Yes all of these!

Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has described the work as "operational aesthetics", and the notion that artwork can be 'functional' is a very intense debate which we champion. Refuge Wear is one example of many different series of artworks, which have the potential of being utilised. Jerome Sans refers to them as 'prototypes', not in the industrial sense of trial products ready for a production line, but that the ideas can trigger off a series of possible functional scenarios. Refuge Wear has been tested by residents from the Sally Alley in Paris, and recently I donated a 'Habitent' to a BISS (Big Issue) vendor in Munich who was convinced that it could serve as a temporary refuge and a street beacon to attract more sales. Unless there is a indisputable social or humanitarian demand for such objects, it would be purposeless to re-produce on an industrial scale.

C.S.: What references do you use for the textiles, garments and choreography when conceiving of your 'social sculptures'.

L.O.: Multiple. At Studio Orta we have assistants who collate general research and project based files of material that could be text, image, sign, sound, sample and object based. There is no unique source, and certainly not just web searches although it has simplified some of the process. Current affairs, philosophy and sociology are my reading matter; text or image can be as equally 'conductive' as the contemporary dance program at Theatre de la Ville in Paris and of course contemporary art exhibitions, especially in Berlin. I would love to see more cinema, but with three children and endless traveling it's virtually impossible.

C.S.: How do you feel that creating forms of social organization confront society to reconsider its values and problems? Is the key to open up a debate with whomever is your audience, or to suggest a visual and material alternative to the way things are?

L.O.: Debate is certainly important with as wide as possible an audience for a more democratic response. Obviously creating artworks for museums is not the ideal situation because the audience tends to be selective, so wherever possible I try to move debatable issues through artworks into very diverse situations, such as open-air dinners, recycling or social enterprises in open urban contexts.

I'm not sure that I'm producing alternatives as such, I'm certainly not suggesting that we should go around wearing suits that link us together to feel more bonded, or eat waste food everyday because this is less consumerist! The highly visual formats hopefully stimulate motives that empower individuals to think about common issues, and often bring very diverse people together. A collective endeavor of a multitude of individuals can make a difference.

C.S.: For this 'Transgressing Fashion' performance, you have turned the symbolism and the uniform of war into a statement of peace. Is this kind of visual subversion, also a technique in significant twentieth century sub-cultural style movements, a key to your output? Does this have significance in relation to the title of this piece, also?

L.O.: The most moving transformation of a horrific and painful event that I have ever seen is visiting Hiroshima in 1995. The open wounds of the town have become a peace shrine for thousands of visitors. The experience was heightened by the visual presence of the skeletal dome, more so than the memorial museums. The ghost dome is like the combat suits, ambulances, stretcher beds, and other symbols of military intervention I have transformed over the last five years; all potent reminders of terrible events.

In applying multiple levels of meaning onto already existing statements, the audience is presented with many different emotions, and hopefully left with a powerful image to take home and reflect on. Where art has an interesting role to play is in location, artworks can be situated in many contexts, look at the V&A for example: the setting is a mausoleum for tombs, and sepulchres; mythical, historical and regal figures; passionate, religious or ethnic combats. We are not necessarily reminded of the current political climate as a visitor to the museum, but the battles were as equally bloody!

I have not really associated my work with fashion before, although in the past I know that it has had a powerful effect on some designer's collections. The reason for making a more direct link is to engage with the fashion system through a process of collaboration and discussion. Possibly measure the impact and certainly discuss fashion's role in reflecting social and political commitment.

C.S.: This event, as with others, has a strong element of protest. Do you ally yourself with any specific activism groups, or keep your work tactically separate?

L.O.: I have collaborated with various small activist groups, according to the context that an artwork is to be shown. There are no tactics or strategy in the choice of who or when. Art evolves as a result of a series of triggered emotions and feelings towards people and situations.

C.S.: You have rationalised that 'the force that art can have is its independence'. Is this why you have felt most comfortable working in the frameworks of the contemporary art world, rather than in any of the other disciplines that your work makes reference to?

L.O.: I'm not sure that I won't work in any of the other disciplines, but I think whatever I create be it an item of clothing or a building its going to turn a few heads, confront and set up a debate.