Art at the Table

Lucy + Jorge Orta

BY GINGER GREGG DUGGAN AND JUDITH HOOS FOX

Lucy + Jorge Orta’s work is situated at the intersection of performance art and object-making, where symbol conflates with tool and relational aesthetics merges with physical forms. Their earliest concerns continue into the present, with additional issues layered over initial areas of investigation, resulting in a rich harmonic practice that addresses the conditions that define our existence—the availability of food and clean water, the sustainability of the biosphere, and the extension of basic human rights across the globe. Lucy recently wrote, “How can art practice pave a new role, faced with the growing problems in this world? How can it erase the contradictions between formal aesthetics and social function? How can works of art empower and nurture constructive dialogue? What contribution can we as artists make to human and environmental sustainability?”

One powerful attempt to answer these queries can be seen in the Orta’s ongoing project, 70 x 7 The Meal, a central work that has been staged numerous times over the past 15 years in more than 30 villages, towns, and cities around the world. Each separate “act,” as the iterations are called, provides a forum for the examination of a specific issue that relates to the health of our planet and its inhabitants.
In conceiving 70 x 7 The Meal, the Ortas looked to Padre Rafael García Herreros (1909–92), who initiated a series of benefit banquets in Bogotá in an effort to rebuild one of the most impoverished parts of the city. The meals were called El Minuto de Dios, and their purpose was to raise funds for an ambitious urban development program. Schools, a theater, community gardens, homes, small factories, a university, even a museum of contemporary art were built as a result.

By calling their iteration of the community banquet 70 x 7 The Meal, the Ortas reference the biblical concept of ad infinitum, which is, of course, a phrase loaded with possible interpretations—the number of guests involved, the number of subsequent meals that can be held, the effects of the conversations that occur at these gatherings. An early 70 x 7 The Meal, act IV, was staged in 2000 in Dieuze, France. Half a kilometer of tables snaked through the small rural town of 3,000 inhabitants, and half the population gathered to share food and exchange ideas about the future of their community.

On October 5, 2013, Philadelphia will be the site of Studio Orta’s 70 x 7 The Meal act XXXIV. In celebration of its 30th year, Mural Arts, the incredibly successful private/public partnership that has distinguished Philadelphia through its large-scale public art program, has invited Lucy + Jorge Orta to design and stage the 34th rendition of The Meal as the culmination of its “What We Sow” initiative. Jane Golden, the inspirational director of the program, writes: “We see in what we do the potential to create innovative works that connect artists with communities in meaningful ways, many of which lie outside the traditional role of mural-making. We want to mine all kinds of visual opportunities to promote positive social change and on-the-ground neighborhood transformation.”

The match between the Ortas’ meals and Mural Arts’ ambitions is perfect. After two visits to Philadelphia spent scouting sites, the Ortas have a sense of possible locations. The city’s wide boulevards, handsome bridges, and riverfronts offer many options for this event, the largest to date. They intend to locate The Meal on the grounds of Independence National Historical Park. This open expanse spanning nine city blocks and anchored by Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell Pavilion (National Park Service properties) could host nearly 3,000 guests. (More information is available at <http://muralarts.org/whatsnew>.)

As a result of their research trips, the Ortas decided to focus on heirloom species in contrast to commercial hybrids, specifically the seeds of foods, vegetables, and flowers that have been passed down for at least 50 years. The questions about conservation, invasive species, and factory farming raised by this investigation will provide the theme for the meal and inspire the design of the plates, table runners, chefs’ and servers’ aprons, and other accoutrements—formal elements that serve as the armature for interactions among participants. The issues addressed in Philadelphia’s act XXXIV—directly into Amazonia, the Ortas’ recent body of work developed after a 2009 journey down the length of the Amazon with scientists, botanists, and anthropologists. By bringing together urban gardening groups, farmers’ associations, and Slow Food proponents, Mural Arts is adding many voices to an ongoing discussion.

Studio Orta’s work with and around food is not alone in the world of contemporary art. In the early 1990s, Rirkrit Tiravanija began to cook Thai dishes in galleries and museums. These activities were about de-objectifying art, shifting the attention to process and away from product. The meals that he later began to stage in closed spaces were about what happened between artist and guests. In 1998, Lee Mingwei launched The Dining Project. After-hours in the Whitney Museum, he prepared meals to suit the preferences of dinner partners selected by lottery. Food as a means of establishing intimacy was the subject of this project. In 2005, Fritz Haeg began his series of Editable Estates, which transform suburban lawns into productive organic vegetable gardens, sources of food rather than consumers of fertilizers and pesticides. J. Morgan Puett’s wood-fired feasts featuring artists as celebrity chefs (ure art cognoscenti) to a remote stylized paradise in rural Pennsylvania. Each of these disparate projects, as well as others treating food production and consumption, holds at its center a distinct imperative. The Ortas have used food to raise issues about availability since the beginning of their career. Their waste in European markets drew them to Les Halles in 1997 to...
collect the food discarded at the end of the day and transform it into preserves. They built apparatus for the collection and preparation of food. They created sculptures out of food crates filled with photographic images of the foodstuffs they once held, sign and signify once again one and the same. Issues that are very timely and topical in 2013—local consumer waste, Slow Food, and the inequalities of global food distribution—were already the Orta’s subject matter.

Their concern with food then expanded into an investigation of water—its purification and distribution. References to water and food recur in the iconography of their Antarticka project (2006–12). Some of the Drop Parachutes, hanging constructions that infer the delivery of emergency supplies to devastated populations, are dedicated to water, with carafes, cups, buckets, floats, and other water-related paraphernalia hanging from umbrella-like parachutes. Forms that feature pots and pans and cooking utensils talk about the necessity of food for global survival. We see these same objects and themes in the wall-mounted Life Line constructions, in which water taps call out both need and source.

Milk, an essential daily source of nutrition and emblem of life, is also of great significance to the Orta’s work. They have been studying milk containers, noting that without the right kind of container, this necessity cannot reach its destination. Here, packaging is about survival rather than branding. In 2010 and 2011, in collaboration with Royal DSM, dairy farmers in India, and the Balsefah farm in Jabeke, Belgium, Lucy and Jorge created a series of life-size milk containers, including 20 different configurations from around the world, all in cast aluminum, with one suite gleaming white, the other metallic silver. These elegant and ghostly forms can be read as Pantonic renderings of this essential liquid.

Milk brings us to one of the Orta’s largest projects. An hour outside of Paris, along the Grand Morin River, they are bringing an abandoned region back to life with the founding of Les Moulins, a nonprofit research center for interdisciplinary workshops and residencies to promote the creation and presentation of experimental in-situ artworks. Two historic paper mills have now