

Title, Techno Fashion

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You see them in the streets, subways, airports, highways - but surroundings like these are not the places you once thought they were. Anonymous figures conceal their faces inside hooded parkas, or gaze vacantly from behind protective visors. Heavy, shapeless coats of reinforced fabric appear to swallow the entire body, while other clothing has been stretched across lightweight frameworks into the shape of a tent or an individual shelter. Coloured in vivid hues of red, blue and green, the individuals contrast dramatically with the cement and brickwork of the urban landscape. Has the city been taken over by a tribe of urban nomads? No, just one of Lucy Orta's artistic interventions, staged to address the social conditions that condemn individuals to an existence on the margins of society. The plight of disaster victims, the homeless, political refugees, the elderly, the invisible poor and the socially disenfranchised are brought unequivocally into the foreground as they inhabit the garments *cum* shelters that define them so vividly against the cityscape.

Lucy Orta is an artist who refuses to accept the superficiality of fashion. Her work inverts the idea that clothing and built environments are separate entities. With art as her medium, her work examines the axis between buildings and garments, reclaiming both of them as sculptural, tactile and architectural expressions of society. Orta's wearable shelters critique social and political issues and provide practical solutions to the problems of transitional living.

She uses her experience as a former fashion designer to articulate social concerns and humanitarian issues, creating convertible garments that are often described as 'portable architecture', 'survival suits', or 'refuge wear'. Although Orta designs structures that can be worn, they are no ordinary garments. Even she has difficulty categorising them completely: "They are one-off pieces that are designed to provoke some sort of conscious awareness of certain issues in society," she said. "But they work on many different levels - on a poetical level, on a metaphoric level, and on the level of social awareness."

Orta's point of departure from conventional fashion was her use of clothing to produce and define urban space, conceptually as well as materially. Recognising fashion's potential to delineate degrees of separateness and individuality, Orta took this concept literally to explore and create separate spheres for temporary habitation. Mirroring Orta's work, fashion designers such as Hussein Chalayan, Kosuke Tsumura, Vexed Generation and C P Company are developing ranges of multi-functional clothing for the urban environment, including parkas that convert into tents and sleeping bags. These garments are made functional by new hi-tech fabrics that are both wind- and rainproof.

Orta connects the design process to issues much wider than the individual. The inspiration behind her work is the human form, the body's need for protection against the elements, and the social elements fashion addresses - but her work explores issues like homelessness, the integrity of the individual, and society's awareness of its own needs. Orta designs according to clothing principles and works with a range of hi-tech fabrics. Multi-function is a central feature in her clothing, which convert from parkas, anoraks and ponchos into tents, sleeping bags, or furniture. The garments come apart into pieces of modular textiles, designed like flexible architectural components that can be instantly transformed into individual or collective survival shelters. These structures are engineered from durable technical weaves and synthetic fibres and use a system of pockets and zippers to disassemble and reassemble.

Lucy Orta lives in Paris and is married to the Argentinean artist, Jorge Orta.ⁱ Orta's affinity with the marginalised resulted from an installation at a Salvation Army shelter in Paris, where she determined to use her design skills to create garments that would give them a sense of security, and facilitate a renewed expression of personality and individuality. She also began

a series of practical workshops and activities that focused on identity, the body and ideas of home. Orta's concern with the increasing problem of homelessness inspired her first *Refuge Wear* prototype: the *Habitent*, a portable mini- environment designed to provide the wearer with a degree of personal comfort and the efficiency to relocate easily. As well as being effective tools in the struggle against social exclusion, *Refuge Wear* is engaging fashion with disciplines ranging from architecture, art, social regeneration and ideological activism. The titles of her principal projects, which are regarded as both art works and fashion collections, speak for themselves: *Nexus Architecture*, *Refuge Wear*, *Modular Architecture*, *Commune Communicate* and *Citizen Platform*.

Orta's designs relate the story of the tension between movement and stillness, between the visible and the invisible. Orta feels that to be homeless in today's urban society is tantamount to invisibility; that the homeless "literally melt and disappear into the margins and framework of the city". Homelessness often indicates a nomadic existence as authorities try and get the homeless off the street and into shelters, or simply tell them to 'move on'. Addressing the disenfranchised meant confronting social taboos and ethical issues to gauge how she could make a real difference. Paradoxically, Orta brought the invisible into sight by giving them space in which to feel secure.

Throughout the *Nexus Architecture* series Orta uses fabric as a membrane or a second-skin around the body. In Orta's work, the body is composed of many 'skins': underwear, the layers of clothes themselves, the overcoat; she considers the sleeping bag to be one of these layers, then the tent as an outer layer. Orta views each outer surface of her work as a second skin - the text, symbols and images she transfers onto the fabric voice statements of identity. On the outer shell of one *Collective Wear* outfit she showed at the Venice Biennale in 1995 is the clear-cut statement: 'Me, I've got a lot to say'. Orta borrowed this expression from a participant in her first *Identity+Refuge* workshop. Each *Collective Wear* intervention says this to articulate that the wearer, whether homeless or not, is claiming their rights to voice their views.

Like packaging, Orta designs clothes that convey information, covering them with text. Packaging has a dual role; its primary function is to facilitate transport, and its secondary role is a strategy to market the product. In the way that packaging attracts customers, Orta uses texts to attract members of society towards problems that are continually avoided.

Many of the homeless Orta worked with expressed fears about living in a home or a shelter due to the traumatic and alienating circumstances they had experienced living with other people. Acknowledging this led Orta to consider how the street could be appropriated as an extension of the household. The *Habitent* achieves this by equipping people with their own mini-environment, where they can live in relative comfort and safety without moving into an institution or hostel. For some of the homeless, the means to survive on the street gives them an alternative to the confines of an institution, meaning that for some, the *Habitent* also voiced a message of resistance and independence.

Orta began using fashion to address human suffering on a global scale as a response to the crises of the Gulf War. Unstable political environments, famine and war resulted in growing numbers of refugees and displaced persons. Orta made a series of drawings entitled *Refuge Wear* to articulate her initial thoughts about finding a response to the homelessness many of these people now faced. Based on the drawings, Orta fabricated series of multipurpose clothing that doubled as temporary shelters, giving them the generic term, *Body Architecture*. The shelters could be comfortably worn as weatherproof clothing, then transformed into simple pod-like or tent-like structures.

Each *Refuge Wear* was designed as a personal environment that could be varied in accordance with weather conditions, social needs, necessity or urgency, and was capable of being equipped as an integrated medical supply. *Refuge Wear* is intended to give refugees some sense of agency and sanctuary as they struggle to mesh their domestic world with larger systems of political mandates. Within a camp or an emergency zone it marks a boundary between public and private domains. In practical terms the units provide the functions of shelter and protection, but the space inside is a symbolic expression of intimate

dwellings. Like a house, they encircle families or individuals with walls of defence, establish points of contact with the outside world, and provide spaces that refugees can appropriate as their 'home'.

Orta also addresses the vulnerability of children. Living under extreme conditions deprives them of the security and intimacy they had while living with their families in their own homes. The idea behind *Collective Dwellings* is to create modules that can be personalized for and by the children to establish their own boundaries by surrounding themselves in fabrics, textures and colours.

Orta's remit to highlight the problems of marginalized groups extended to challenge the issue of social visibility, as her focus widened to include the invisible poor and the socially disenfranchised. She continued to use *Refuge Wear* as a medium, staging *Refuge Wear* installations in urban centres. The installations attracted the attention of the art world, who dubbed them 'relational aesthetics' because of their universal message and interactive properties. Orta regarded these public shows as her first 'interventions'. "It's about taking the art outside the institutional venue and into the street," she said. "It's also about developing a team and about initiating ideas and seeing how they can develop afterwards." Interventions often resulted in cementing social solidarity to counteract the problems of homelessness, and fostering a drive to redress the issues.

Like other conceptual artists, the ideas behind each piece remains central to the understanding of Orta's work. "My motivation is to communicate," she explained. "To communicate a new art form which can involve all sorts of genres, from performance, to intervention, to object-making, to installation, to media. But at the same time to bring to the fore some social awareness, through the objects, or dialogue, or discussion." Squatted buildings, housing estates and railway stations became the locus for subsequent interventions. Orta's interventions have added impact because they translate the narrative literally where the problems were occurring - an approach that attracts media attention and broadcasts on British and French television.

Following her interventions throughout 1992 and 1993, Orta expanded her protest from the plight of the socially disenfranchised to explore the larger problems of displaced communities. Orta's *Body Architecture* series developed with the protective principles of *Refuge Wear*, but advocated interdependency rather than individual or group isolation. Its hi-tech fabric domes and tent-like structures suggest physical and psychological refuge within a larger protective enclosure. *Body Architecture* heralded a new direction in Orta's work; she shifted her fashion practice away from the microcosm of the individual to the macrocosm of the community, from practical protective clothing to temporary modular shelters. Drawing on the writings of Paul Virilio, Orta explained why her work expanded to express collectives. Virilio wrote: "The precarious nature of society is no longer that of the unemployed or the abandoned, but that of individuals socially alone. In the proximate vicinity our families are falling apart. One's individual life depends on the warmth of the other. The warmth of one gives warmth to the other. The physical link weaves the social link."

Of all Orta's projects, *Nexus Architecture* seems to be the most emblematic of her approach. More symbolic than functional, *Nexus Architecture* takes its name from 'Nexus', meaning a link or a tie, or a linked series or group. The collection is made up of individual outfits made to emulate the body suits worn by Greenpeace activists during anti-nuclear protests. Unlike the Greenpeace suits, which were made to be worn individually, Orta's suits have attachable tubes of fabric that can zipper wearers together to form a single collective garment. As the fabric tubes link participants together at the front and the back of the garments, it enables the individual suits to form one garment worn by hundreds of people. *Nexus Architecture* interventions have been staged in Europe, the United States, South Africa, Bolivia and Mexico, joining together over one hundred people in a single column. Orta describes the tubes of fabric that connected one person to another as a literal representation of a 'social link'.

Part of Orta's philosophy of collectivism is to plan events and workshops beyond the interventions, that teach a skill or bring people together to raise awareness of key issues. "At

the Johannesburg Biennale I created a workshop and employed thirteen migrant labourers to come and make their own *Nexus* links,” she said. “So it was about passing on a skill, how to make a garment, but at the same time making them aware of how they can work together as a team to create something and giving them the possibility to manifest something.” Making their own suits also involved them in making the aesthetical and planning decisions for their suits, instilling a notion of individuality into each.

Modular Architecture combines the communal principles of *Body Architecture* with the protective function of *Refuge Wear*. *Modular Architecture* consists of temporary, portable dwellings made up of individual sections, panels or units that can be combined to make a number of different forms, or simply worn as protective clothing. Orta's bases them on multiples of four, where groups of four individual units combine to become one single construction. They provide the same efficiency and protection for the urban homeless as well as the adventurous nature lover. For example, a group of four people could travel together, each wearing a hooded, waterproof, insulated, ski-suit like outfit, equipped with pockets to store food and water. When they stop to rest, each unit is taken off and zipped together to make a four-person tent. Made of aluminium-coated polyamide, the tent is waterproof and windproof. It is held up by supporting posts and secured to the ground by pegs along the base. The suits are practical but also sculptural in form, inhabitable installations with aerodynamics and wearability.

The *Life Nexus Village Fête* is an evolving architectural and social configuration that expands the collective principles behind Orta's *Modular Architecture*. Though these evolved through her experimentation of fashion, the design does not facilitate the same wearability that most of her other models do. The installation comprises aluminium-coated domes, or *Primary Structures* as Orta calls them, inter-connected by *Nexus* extensions. Each dome has space for up to three people and room for folding tables, chairs, or plinths. The *Primary Structures* are positioned in a hexagonal shape encircling a central space (foyer) that provides a forum for community workshops. The hexagonal layout provided the structural axis from which further *Primary Structures* can radiate. These constructions, together with the participants, create the feel of a traditional village festival, which Orta uses to create a dialogue among all members of a community.

The *Connector* is a similar architectural infrastructure to create a modular social network. This infrastructure forms the basis of a mobile village, a refugee camp or a conference centre; it is an architectural axis that can grow in size according to population. Individuals can attach and detach at will to join other groups or move to different sectors of the community.

Orta's interventions have demonstrated her *Refuge Wear* and *Body Architecture* garments in a wide range of urban environments in central Paris, its suburbs, and at the 1995 Venice Biennale and the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. One of Orta's most renowned interventions did not feature clothing or shelter, answering another one of the body's needs instead. Entitled, *All in One Basket: a reflection on hunger and food waste*, the intervention was held at the Forum Saint-Eustache des Halles in Paris in March 1997. The idea came to her the summer before, when she saw television news coverage of French farmers tipping trailers of fruit onto the highways to protest against European Community agricultural legislation. Troubled by these images, Orta realised that, in a less dramatic manner, the Paris market traders also dumped fruit and vegetables at the close of the markets. She reacted by organising the collection of leftover food and produce in the Les Halles quarter of Paris, and asking a celebrity chef to cook it. The food was served on a buffet and passers-by were invited to eat. The people of Les Halles, whether rich or poor participated in a demonstration of gastronomic recycling.

The *All in One Basket* project led to Orta's incorporation of food into her humanitarian projects. She created a solution to demonstrate how emergency meals could be provided in times of emergency. Titled *70 x 7, The Meal, Act III*, the work was installed at the Kunstraum gallery in Innsbruck, Austria (2000). The project was, according to Orta, “the third act in a series of actions that bring the community together via the ritual of a meal thus creating links and engaging the lives of the broader community.”ⁱⁱⁱ The ‘70 x 7’ formula symbolises the infinite, taken from the biblical signification. Orta's idea is to transform the symbol into reality

by organising meals that could expand exponentially in divisions of seven to accommodate an infinite number of guests. *70 x 7, Act III* consists of an extending seventy-metre tablecloth set with four hundred and ninety Limoges dinner plates manufactured specifically for the work. The Kunstraum then organised a series of meals for multiples of seven guests, using surplus produce from local farmers. Orta had a limited edition of seventy wooden cases made to hold seven plates and a forty-nine metre printed tablecloth.

Orta's fashions and interventions make strong statements about clothing, humanity, individuality and communality. But are they fashion? Art installations? Architectural structures? Orta's work collapses such categorical denominations of media and genre one into the other. Fashion, installation art and architecture can all be considered as interventions in space. To a certain extent, fashion designers and architects struggle with the same considerations of egress, proportions, aesthetics and materials, but Orta does not create dwellings in the literal sense, she merely explores the spaces traditionally allocated to buildings by deploying temporary shelters.

The common denominator linking Lucy Orta's different projects is the staging of a social bond. Orta attempts to rethink fashion as the testing ground for what social responsibility can achieve. She uses fashion as the starting point for the transformation of the individual and the society, using fashion to prompt social metamorphosis. The power of her temporary environments rest in the idea that the material expression of a cultural idea can have lasting effects on people long after their original construction.

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ⁱ Though based in Paris, Orta holds the Rootstein Hopkins Chair in Fashion at The London College of Fashion.

ⁱⁱ See www.studio-orta.com for more information.