

**Title, Lucy Orta: Global Gear**

**Author, Milani, Joanne**

**Exhibition review at the Contemporary Art Museum at the University of South Florida.  
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Artist or activist? Creator of fine art or social commentator? Routine labels don't easily stick to Lucy Orta, whose unconventional works fill the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum.

Orta-designed gear includes anoraks that convert into sleeping bags, portable tents for use by the urban homeless or political refugees, and survival suits that look like they belong in space. Called "collective wear," the survival suits are equipped with zippers to link individuals via a fabric tube reminiscent of an umbilical cord. The gear is a way of "mustering solidarity in a fractured environment," said Orta, who lives in Paris with her husband, Argentine artist Jorge Orta.

"Nexus" is a link between individuals, and the title of the show, "Nexus Architecture," refers to her way of building a structure to demonstrate that we are all, basically, family. Connected at the navel, we are part of a global village. "It's about community and interconnectedness," the slender, soft-spoken Orta said in an interview before the opening of the Tampa show.

Trained as a fashion designer, the British-born Orta became disillusioned with the fashion industry 10 years ago. That, plus a money-driven Parisian art world and a cutback in artists' grants, fueled her social awareness of suffering close to home and afar. In 1992, she was touched by the Kurdish refugee crisis that peaked after the Gulf War. "I wanted to engage people visually and intellectually to respond to the war," said the 35-year-old artist, "I wanted to incite people to discuss and debate what was going on." Determined to bring attention to the refugees, she used synthetic fibers, zippers and lightweight armatures to invent a waterproof jacket that could be opened into a portable shelter.

She also was aware of the homeless folks scrambling for shelter in Paris subways and for food in the city streets. In 1996, appalled at seeing produce dumped on highways by French farmers protesting European Union regulations, she organized volunteers to recycle discarded food to feed the homeless.

Because of high technology, "we have virtual relationships, but not with real people," she said. "We learn about other communities, but we won't take into account our neighbor down the road."

Since she began inventing her gear, Orta has been winning critical acclaim and exhibitions around the world. In Johannesburg, South Africa, she worked with 30 women in a migrant labor shelter, helping them create their own outfits. They paraded around the city and were spontaneously joined by another 30 people. In Japan, she worked with students. In Scotland, she held workshops with the unemployed.

At Tampa's Metropolitan Ministries in July 2000, she worked with a dozen teenagers in "Connector IV." Videos and collages from the project are included in the USF show. "They designed a science fiction fantasy world in which each person, from garbage collector to doctor, was equally important within this ecosystem," said Orta.

Unlike most fine art usually found in an elite territory of wealthy collectors, museums and dealers, Orta's world is streetwise and active. Aiming to put the spotlight on the humble, homeless and dispossessed, Orta has set up shop in the streets where global trade meetings are held. "Be present where the politicians are not," she said.

Can her art and actions help solve what she has called "nomadism in contemporary society"?

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Marger, Mary Ann  
LUCY ORTA: Fashioning Change Through Art

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Lucy Orta's medium is sculpture. Her message is social concern. She makes art not for, but with the underprivileged. The art that you see is the bright and shiny remains of Orta's act of creation, on display at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum. And though Lucy Orta is making waves worldwide, this is her first American solo show. The local venue is appropriate. While her work takes up the entire museum, one installation had its germination in Tampa in July 2000 when Orta came to town to work with at-risk teens through Metropolitan Ministries. Titled Connector Sector IV, it hangs on the back wall of the large gallery. Together Orta and the teens created clothing and architecture designs. She then took the rough ideas back to her Paris studio, where she refined them into works of art. The result is a versatile array of colorful full-size sleeping bags that can be connected or disconnected, or transformed (like all her art) into other uses according to need (you can wear it or live in it), and that can expand to accept an increasing population.

Orta was born in England and lives in Paris, but the world is her workshop. And though her name belongs in the upper echelons of today's high art, the nature of her art puts her in touch with people who have no knowledge of where art has been, much less where it's going. Her works are happenings. The empty clothes on display merely document these events, as do photos on the walls. Orta studied fashion design but switched to fine art that would make use of her know-how. She expresses her strikingly innovative ideas in her work with the poor, the homeless and the unemployed both through projects, in which she works directly with the underclass, and through the documentary evidence that these projects took place, as witnessed in the photos and the various exhibits in the USF display. She has produced other "Connector Sectors" in homeless centers in Brussels and at a psychiatric hospital in Quebec.

Her work touches many levels. As architecture it is mobile, for a world community on the move. As art, it is highly original in concept and varied within her chosen limits of execution. As fashion, it goes beyond function to question consumerism and the role of style. The smaller gallery is filled with an installation, Nexus Architecture Operation, that varies in size and shape according to the space available. Here it consists of 26 upright body suits, connected by zippered fabric tubes to form a grid. Words and images are important to the message. The suits have silhouettes of heads photo-silkscreened onto the back. The tubes bear single words: "link," "nexus," "react," "heart." Thus the "connection" is as social and psychological as it is physical.

Like Connector and Nexus, the other installations in the show are of figurative components that work together. Stretchers, each with a sleeping bag, are mounted side by side on the wall of the lobby. Six life-size sleeping bags protrude from a silver tent, each connected at the feet. As performance pieces, each bodysuit or sleeping bag serves to costume one average-size adult. Fresh and bright, they appear suitable for camping, offering private space yet retaining a link with others. Yet unlike traditional performance art (if performance art can be called traditional), Orta performs with purpose beyond aesthetics. For the second Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa, she taught female migrant workers to make a garment. By the end of the workshop, each carried away a pattern and the skills to start a business. Orta had made the nexus - the connection - through an action of social involvement. Art projects for prosperous countries are different from those for developing nations. For the latter she makes Refuge Wear, a versatile but temporary shelter, handy for emergency use. For the former, she puts together a Building Survival Kit. Created in response to living conditions in Peru, it comes with tools that enable a family to construct a permanent dwelling from the refuse found on streets - because that's the only material available. The viewer needs to understand all this in order to appreciate the show. Still, it's okay to see something unintended by the artist, for example, to interpret the silver tent attachments as soft sculpture iron lungs. Though the show predates Sept. 11, it is easy to add significance to the title, Survival Gear, or to wonder if a sleeping bag could morph into a body bag.

Nowhere is the connection more startling than in a photo of a string of people wearing bright yellow bodysuits, all linked together, filling up the stairs from a subway station in downtown Manhattan. If the viewer feels a sense of missing something by not seeing the actual performances, or at least mannequins in the clothes, consider the function of the museum, which preserves art and artifacts from history. Orta's art is intended to function, and she herself believes it is more appropriate for "transitional spaces": the Salvation Army, trade fairs, primary schools. And "high profile contemporary art museums. "We are in pursuit of creativity, which has the capacity to stir the conscience and eventually transform social and cultural misconceptions and inequalities," Orta has said of her studio's mission.

She asks a lot of art - and even more of art lovers.