

Weiner Secession

Hou Hanru in conversation with Lucy Orta, May 1999

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HH: I am interested in two progressions your work has made. The first being the shift from design, fashion design to more architectural forms, like tents for example, and the merging between human clothing and living environment. The second is that your personal design/creation has opened out to community participation and communication. Can you describe how this decision has been implemented and how this change manifests itself; also what are the experiences and conclusions you can draw from such a shift, especially the process of communicating in the community context?

LO: I studied fashion-textile design in an excellent design school in the North of England and I worked as a successful designer for various brands in Paris for a number of years, but throughout my practice as an artist until now, I have not designed fashion even though I make reference to clothing in different bodies of work. The first sculptures I realised, the Refuge Wear series, were conceived as temporary mobile shelters and took the form of tents, bivouacs and sleeping bags. A cross between conceptual and semi-functioning mobile habitats cum protective overcoats, for nomadic situations. My knowledge as a designer led me to explore the new characteristics of fabric membranes and the revolutionary developments that have taken place in synthetic fibres and textile manufacturing since the 1990's and this opened up an infinite field of material research, far more advanced in applications than the commercial fashion industry. I was interested in the 'intelligent' textiles revolution, which allowed a more conceptual approach to design and in the discussions about the new socio-communicative role of clothing. Body Architecture, Refuge Wear, Modular Architecture and Nexus Architecture, were not constructed to solve the growing problems of our society (loneliness, unemployment, homelessness, survival in general), however through their presentations in the public sphere, they brought to light the state of crisis and triggered debate, both within the cultural domain and beyond. The workshops, actions, interventions and conferences that we instigated simultaneously were just some of the ways of exchanging and confronting diverse publics and points of view. By bringing together interdisciplinary collaborations between children, university students, teachers, social workers, architects, philosophers... all kinds of communication barriers were overcome. Two significant examples are Nexus Architecture, created for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 and Dwelling (1998-2004). These collaborations confirmed that it was possible to work together with a common project goal with migrant workers, foster children, design students, unemployed adults, educators, architects and curators across geographical spaces and time and trigger transformations in people's lives.

HH: It is very interesting to see that as I remember the first time I saw your work was in galleries and museums.

LO: In fact initially I had no involvement in the Parisian art scene. I had been assisting Jorge who was in the process of salvaging his archive of ephemeral performances that he has lost in a studio fire; this work had been created in Argentina during the 1970's where the cultural circuit was completely non-existent. In this context, unsettled and without any work to show to a public, in a period when the galleries were enjoying perverse peak sales we went on to develop together a new series, Light Works, which are the large-scale ephemeral light projections in remote locations across the world. The first was 'Imprints on the Andes' an expedition and a series of light paintings across the Inca trail in Peru in 1992, here there was no audience, no system and the work was totally experimental to mark the 500 years since the 'discovery' of South American continent. Later that year, I began developing the Refuge Wear, and Habitant was immediately requisitioned for an exhibition at Le Galerie Anne de Villepoix, but in parallel I was organising interventions in public spaces where I could be in contact with a social reality and with the populations concerned by the questions I was asking. It was within the art system that the work received critical attention and I think it's normal that the art world see the results of the actions in museums and galleries, as echoes of a living and participative art, just as it is quite normal that many of the people I was working with would not normally go to a museum. I was aware that the work was dissociated from its original context but it was extremely important, right from the beginning, to communicate to different audiences and create the interface between the two.

HH: How do you handle these differences? The museum or gallery context would in a way empty out the original meaning of the work. How do you expect the public to read the work in such a context?

LO: In the beginning there was a separation between the extramural actions and intramural exhibitions. I was working on the street and the gallery exhibited the results. I was aware of the separation between the living experience and its frozen institutionalisation but felt that the museum public would be able to reconstruct the original context. Wherever possible I would attempt to include the institution into the larger research process right from the beginning and as a result my projects became more intra-collaborative as curatorial practices changed in the mid-nineties. Artists and curators began working more closely together conducting community outreach work prior to public presentation, spending time with local groups, understanding the context, elaborating the artefacts and reflecting on how to exhibit the stages of this collaborative process. One pertinent example would be 'Commune Communicate' commissioned by the FRAC Lorraine in the town of Metz France, who enabled me to work with inmates at the local detention centre - CP Metz. They contacted the detention

centre and set up the workshops inside the prison with the inmates, you can imagine how difficult this is to put into place! Together with the curators and inmates we imagined how the artworks could resonate beyond the prison into the city. Back in the studio, based on the private conversations with inmates, we made 'Peripheral Communication Units', small wooden suitcases containing audio-recordings, personal photographs of the inmates and postcards. These were presented to the public in Metz town centre on hand-made tables for passers-by to listen to the inmates and respond on the purpose made postcards, which were in turn posted back to the detention centre. This presentation toured to the Casino contemporary art museum in Luxembourg; and then we staged a final exhibition inside CP Metz for the whole prison community. This type of flux and diversity of public engagement –commissioning agency – non-art institution – street - museum - community- can be established at the outset of any project when artists and institutions work closely together from the outset.

HH: This is similar to the project presented at the Wiener Secession in Vienna Austria in 1999. In a way it is connecting, a kind of continuous flow between the interior, the museum space and the exterior Naschmarkt.

LO: I don't see the museums a white cube, I prefer to engage with the curators as equal team-mates to tease-out and facilitate a process. Of course it's still necessary to have a physical gallery space – here the public are able to reconstruct projects that have happened elsewhere. An exhibition is a quite place to reflect upon a subject and help raise issues to another level of debate. For 'HortiRecycling Enterprise' in the Wiener Secession we're experiencing an incredible progression in curatorial practices, we are in constant contact and as we speak initiatives are being instigated by the team way beyond the traditional parameters of the job: visiting the Naschmarkt vendors daily, creating the jam recipes, discussing health issues with Viennese chef Staud. I will mediate these different initiatives so that the enterprise can be carried through from idea to operational ability. Instead of discarding the over ripe fruit and vegetables, market vendors will be given "Collect Units", brightly coloured printed bags, to fill with rejected produce throughout the day. These will be collected by a team manning the 'Processing Units', mobile kitchens with integrated shopping carts, sinks, hotplates, freezers, etc. The ripe produce will be cleaned, chopped and cooked by Staud on location in the market. We will distribute the fresh delicacies and incite the public to take up these kinds of sustainable initiatives. Presented in the Secession first floor gallery will be a second kitchen complete with a 'Collect Unit Pulley', resembling a wooden winch reminiscent of the medieval pulley systems used to haul groceries in baskets to the upper floors of tall buildings. Here, other produce can be delivered to the gallery to be cleaned and cooked on site either bottled, a traditional preserving technique or frozen in dainty portions. This pilot action itself will take place both on the market and inside the gallery as part of the

multiple possibilities a recycling enterprise and this in turn implicates, the art institution, the street and the respective publics.

HH: You are talking about your role as an artist coordinator. How do you re-position yourself in such a process because on the one hand you have a whole mobilization of the institution, which takes the institution beyond its established limit or borderline and out of the art context, and on the other hand you are involved with the community, or even the whole communication society. To what extent do you consider your work to be an artistic project or, is it more like of sociological project? How do you define this?

LO: I don't see how the art project and the sociological project can be confronted - they are linked and inseparable.

For several years we have been looking for formats for our work, which enable interaction and reactions to the difficulties and needs of local communities, together with the community in as many poetical manners possible. After HortiRecycling, '70 x 7 The Meal'¹ was the natural logic to our research process, from the food collecting and recycling, to the fabrication of the culinary objects and artefacts, to the actual ritual of dining.

In the meal settings, we invite a small number of guests to become part of a 'endless' banquet, and in turn implicate them to invite other people so the act of creating the event happens through the chain reaction of human interaction. We are merely triggers in that process, or enablers. The artwork attempts to become invisible, taking the form of the most cherished of our rituals; it mimics the essential human needs to eat and to unite. Only small signals, like the hand-printed tablecloth or the Limoges porcelain plates leave the trace that something unusual has brought these guests together. But these clues should remain discreet so as not to incite the 'fear of art', and allow the catalyst encounters blossom naturally. Setting the meals in an urban space is a return to the need for spontaneous general assemblies around specific subjects, bringing people to concert, to reconcile, to reflect together, with the potentiality of an artwork that is active in the heart of a community. The invisibility of the art renders this tool more efficient, erasing the fear of 'not-belonging' to. Nobody can change the world with a meal, but each meal changes the world.

HH: This type of project reminds us of past experimental art, i.e. Joseph Beuys's social sculpture. But sculpture is based on a kind of personal obsession with the notion of creativity and he wants to transfer, transmit the message about creativity as human nature to society, to make people become creative even though they might not need to. This is one-way communication or pushing people to do

¹ http://www.studio-orta.com/artwork_list.php?fs=2&fm=0&fd=0

something. In your case the situation is perhaps more open. How do you initiate this process artistically and to what extent can you still call this artistic or creative?

LO: Since working together with Jorge we are pursuing the idea of art as a catalyst for social change, which a generation later, follows Beuys's footsteps. We believe the creative potential of a public no longer needs to be proved, it needs to be recognised fully and channelled into simple initiatives in order to mobilize an even wider range of community members, be it the street vendor, passer-by, museum curator or visitor. These individual initiatives in the form of art actions, performances, or whatever, are the ingredients to catalyze social change.

Throughout our practice we have been moved by various problems our society is facing – solitude – hunger - homelessness - water shortage - climate change - and we elaborate poetic schema's to attempt to combat these problems. By developing long term research strategies over a minimum ten-year life span in 'acts', we can actually begin to tackle problems such as food waste, explore new ways to change peoples water consumption attitudes or habits, activate debates and discussions about organ donation, and thus get closer to the seed of real change, which could even lead to the modification of current legislation.

HH: Can you give a few examples of these Acts? How do you shift your design to specific contexts and how does this bring you to Vienna?

LO: Each act is part of an evolving process that becomes more complex and embedded with the possibilities that each locale allows. For act one of the food series 'All in One Basket', we hosted an open-air buffet made out of the abandoned fruit from Parisian markets, in one of the busiest central shopping district of Les Halles in Paris. The market itself has been delocalized and its traditional space handed over to real-estate developers who have replaced it with an underground shopping mall. All in One Basket pointed a finger at waste in the city, but also the much larger issue of over consumption and the inequalities of food distribution globally. Using the market example to focus on a simple city phenomena, we could generate a vibrant public to debate around the broader subject. With over 300 kilograms of ripe produce that we had 'gleaned' from the local markets, the famous delicatessen Stohrer, our professional partner, arduously cooked it into a variety of sweet dishes. Samples of jam, jellies and puddings were available in small bowls for free and visitors could buy souvenir editions of our bottled and labelled preserves. During the course of the day, thousands of people stopped by - members of the art community, shoppers, children, tramps, students, immigrants,... In the adjacent gallery of Saint Eustache we had installed an installation of artefacts constructed from wooden fruit crates, and our home-made preserves along side photographs of mounds of discarded market produce. On the 'Collect Units', visitors could listen to personal stories in the form of audio recordings from the

community of gleaners at the weekly markets.

Two years later we were able to stage act two in Vienna thanks to the historical context of the Wiener Secession which was founded in 1897 by artists Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser, Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Maria Olbrich, Max Kurzweil, Otto Wagner, and others. These artists objected to the prevailing conservatism of the Vienna Künstlerhaus with its orientation toward Historicism and were concerned with exploring the possibilities of art outside the confines of academic tradition. The Secession building could be considered the icon of the movement and above its entrance was carved the phrase "to every age its art and to art its freedom". I could take advantage of this history, the proximity of the Naschmarkt opposite the gallery and the energetic Secession curators who carry on the legacy of the Viennese manifest.

HH: You mention something, which is very interesting: legislation. How art can influence a legislative change, a very effective channel for art to have more social commitment?

LO: It is clear that a Refuge Wear, a Nexus Architecture or a Processing Unit cannot bring about a direct response to the physical distress of exodus, social fracture, or famine. However, it is the research process, linked to the hundreds of collective actions and manifestation in the public sphere that could by the 'butterfly-wing' effect, raise awareness and eventually lead to a change in legislation. Perhaps this is where the veritable sculpture can take form.

HH: How do you expect that the legislation system to accept this proposal?

LO: It is solely by the collective dimension and a trans-disciplinary organisation - a democratic voice - that the coherent discourse could possibly attract or convince the system. Today it is obvious that the system is waiting for new initiatives.

HH: The next question logically will be - do you expect yourself one day to get more politically involved?

LO: No, definitely not and I have been asked to on several occasions. I was invited to become a member of the European Cultural Parliament, but even here there is too much discussion and not enough action. I am totally engaged in this art project and we are seeing an important shift in the institutional perception of this type of thinking. There is too much ground to be covered and there is room for many more members of the team. The force of art is its independence!

