

## The Languages of FOOD-WATER-LIFE (Stowe)

Language unites and divides us. A common language brings people together; “foreign” languages can be barriers to communication and understanding. Lucy and Jorge Orta, born respectively in England and Argentina, headquartered in France, and advocates of supra-national borderlessness, use language(s) in FOOD-WATER-LIFE to remind us of our commonalities while acknowledging our differences.

I count at least seven languages in and on the objects in this show; the Antarctica World Passport distributed at the show uses eight. Language plays a special role on the lovely plates fabricated for the Ortas’ famous community dinners. Some of these are wordless; some feature symbols (hearts and  $\pi$ , for example, and the names of chemical elements); some, like the French translation of a prayer of Saint Francis, or the Spanish recipe for *Sopa de papas de Humahuaca*, are in one language; more display several languages, inviting the viewer or the diner to move between them.

And language plays a central role in informing gallery visitors about the work. Wall labels, presumably in their local language(s), provide important background and give the works names that make their creators’ intentions clearer. Of course the works in the show also communicate through their constituent materials, forms, and colors, with the labels serving as supplements to or confirmations of their visual signification. Some of the most striking pieces in the show, for me, are four roughly rectangular frames made of water (or gas?) pipes, complete with spigots, each holding a brightly colored life vest and each also bedecked with an array of the show’s theme objects: canteens, intact and perforated, gloves, floats, coils of rope. Fascinated as I was by the show’s jangler constructions, I found my eye drawn to these pieces by their relatively simple form, their colors, their by-then familiar, locally iconic elements. What were they? Outsized pack frames? Stretchers? Yes and no. They are, according to their labels, “Life Line—Survival Kit [s]” an identity and a function that take on particularly powerful meaning in their setting in the Zilkha Gallery, within sight and hearing of the Antarctic videos, witnesses to the life-threatening harshness of that international, polyglot land without borders that serves as an icon for the Ortas’ cosmopolitan vision.

And what do “life” and “survival” require in such a setting? Water, of course, but also protection from water, perhaps an allusion to the likely contribution the melting ice will make to rising seas; food; community, as embodied in the ropes—lifelines—themselves; protection from the cold; and communication, to establish and affirm that community. FOOD-WATER-LIFE uses and celebrates color, sound, iconic forms, whimsy—and language—to embody and communicate its urgent concerns with hunger and thirst, illness, community, the fragility of our beleaguered planet, and the threat to our own survival.

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Modified on: Jan 28th, 2013 [Log in](#)