Title, Lucy Orta: Art, Fashion and Mobility. Temporary interventions in Space

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Lucy Orta is a British artist, based in Paris, whose work is most often based on explorations of the relationship of the individual to the community, through the medium of fashion and architecture. Notable projects have included *Identity + Refuge* (1995), in which, with a group of participants from a Salvation Army refuge, Orta transformed the surplus clothes donated to one of the organisation's charity shops into new forms of clothing, and in the process explored issues of identity with individuals who commonly lacked a firm sense of their own being, and a series of exercises, including the *Survival Kit* series (1992-1996), *Mobile Intervention Units* convoy (2001-2005) and *Refuge Wear* (1992-1999), which emphasised questions of personal space and survival in an urban environment. Orta's projects are often blueprints for activity that can be transferred, with attention to specific details, from one site to another. Her *Nexus Architecture* - in which participants wear what look like hooded industrial uniforms, and are linked to one another by a tube of fabric that is attached to the belly of one outfit and the rear of another – has been staged in cities as far apart as Sydney, New York, Johannesburg and Lyon since its first outing at the 1995 Venice Biennale. Furthermore, the work may be staged with varying numbers of participants, and ages; in 1998 it formed part of the 'Global March Against Child Labour' in Lyon, and perhaps its most charming series of manifestations are *Nexus Architecture x 110* (2002-2004) in which 110 children from the town of Cholet in France, were linked together; as well as children from diverse schools in Miami, USA and Birmingham, UK.

Orta's work has most often been considered under the rubric of 'relational aesthetics'; that relatively recent critical paradigm which sees contemporary art in terms of its potential for initiating social interaction – creating participants rather than spectators for art – through work that engages with the world rather than representing it. That bracketing is most overt in a widely disseminated interview between Orta and the curator Nicolas Bourriaud, the chief promoter of relational aesthetics. [1] There are, however, a number of difficulties with relational aesthetics, not least a naïve investment in the public function of the art institution as site of social transformation, and an equally wide-eyed notion of art's socially transformative capacities. (Having Rirkrit Tiravanija cook for a clutch of art-world cognoscenti at one of the world's now innumerable biennales, or in a Chelsea gallery is not a socially transformative act, nor is it even a metaphor for one.) [2]

However, I'd suggest that Orta's work, like that of many artists, including especially Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, to whom Bourriaud has applied his theories, both in print and in exhibition, is a good deal smarter than the paradigms in which it has most often been framed. We are perhaps better off by approaching Orta's work in terms of the relation of the body (or bodies) to space and to architecture, than try to understand it in terms simply of human relation and social reconfiguration. In particular, we need to consider the ways in which Orta makes palpable, makes haptic, bodies that are usually invisible in the spaces that they occupy, the ways in which she stakes a claim to space by those who have no power to engineer either social or architectural spaces.

As a theoretical model through which we might apprehend Orta's practice I'd suggest that the concept of the *heterotopia* outlined in a 1967 essay by the French thinker Michel Foucault, and in the preface to his volume *Les mots et les choses*, is particularly useful. [3] The *heterotopia* is a space where, within defined and organised boundaries, and despite the intention of its design, there may be multiple and contradictory uses. A *heterotopia* is, effectively, a space whose use is not always that for which it was intended, and whose users are not always those expected or intended to be within it. But as the 1967 essay (though it was not published in English until 1986) makes clear, Foucault understood the *heterotopia* as being as much constituted by networks of relation as it is by physical or geographic limits. [4]

Foucault sees in such spaces the possibility of dissent, of a resistance to the spatial constitution of power, but such dissent need not be understood in terms simply of political violence, or of revolt. Rather, the unintended visibility of subjects is what articulates the possibility of a state of things as other than they are. Of Orta's projects it is, paradoxically, a series that are the least architectural and most obviously mobile, that may serve as an example of this bestowing of presence within the space constructed by the discourses of power. *Connector Mobile Village + M.I.U* (Mobile Intervention Unit), 2001, and *Mobile Intervention Convoy*, 2003, made with her husband Jorge, used former military vehicles as the basis of mobile communities, equipped with all the necessities of sleeping, eating and immediate medical care, that could support small groups. In 2001 Orta took part in the exhibition 'Transforms' in Trieste, staged at the same time as a G8 summit on the environment. In a city centre otherwise entirely cleared of traffic for reasons of security, Orta's two silver trucks, carrying images of Rwandan refugees and western environmental crisis (mad cows) came to be parked outside the hotel where the participating ministers were lodged.

If these projects represented a high-profile contestation of space and political visibility, her discreet community projects, however, are equally effective in their re-imagination of both the organisation of public space and the organisation of social relations within it. Orta's work here is both an address to the subject and a facilitation of the subject's address to space. The *Nexus Architecture and Collective Dwelling* projects are particularly relevant here in their yoking together of individuals and local associations to create mobile communities with a higher visibility, and therefore a greater social weight. Such a project was used within the safe discursive space of a sanctioned protest [The Global March Against Child Labour] in Lyon in 1998 worn by the children sheltered from abuse, Orta spent several weeks working with them prior to the march; but also by young teenagers living on the streets in Sydney Australia (1998); desperate migrant labourers in Johannesburg (1997); the antipollution protest march; [Appel d'Air] (1997); amongst others; unemployed adults in the infamous Gorbals estate in Edinburgh (1999); immigrant communities on the Lower East Side New York 1997; etc.. One might speculate about how effective, and visible, such an intervention would be if it used child-workers, outside the sweatshops that employ them, or even if it was deployed on behalf of the families and children from communities devastated by the closure of a factory or shipyard.

In terms of its local effects, her *All in One Basket – Les Halles* (1997) and *Hortirecycling - Vienna* (1999) are most interesting. The projects did not use clothing; indeed its material by-products were minimal, video and sound recordings, iron trolleys with salvaged crates and shelves with jars of preserved foodstuffs left over from the event. Over a period of six months Orta and her assistants collected fruit and vegetables that were being discarded at the end of the day by traders in the Les Halles market. At the same time the people of Les Halles were interviewed about the differing relationships they had to food. The 'waste' product was made into syrups, jams and preserves, some of which, at the end of the six months, were served in an outdoor buffet at Les Halles, prepared by a leading Parisian chef Stohrer. (In Vienna with leading jam producer, Staud). The work not only highlighted issues of waste in modern western society (Britain, for example, throws away a third of its food production) but it also stressed the way in which communities are created around food. The people who came together to eat the produce from *All in One Basket* were, for a brief moment, a community. Perhaps they were a community with nothing in common save their shared investment in a particular space, but in that moment those normally invisible to each other (and perhaps those invisible to themselves) saw each other, maybe for the first time.

Art does not, sadly, change the world overnight or on its own; if it is fortunate it makes a contribution to those discourses that alter history, if only to change its course by a fraction of a degree. Salutary reminder of their responsibilities and the crises faced by their citizens and subjects, I doubt if Orta's *Mobile Intervention Units,* transformed red-cross ambulances installed in front of the Town Hall in Trieste directly influenced a single minister or advisor (2001). But, it was nonetheless a potent symbol of the need to understand mobility, both of individuals and

spaces, addressed to nations increasingly obsessed with the impermeability of their boundaries to outsiders, whilst simultaneously encouraging capital flows across them. A leading British politician, conjuring asylum seekers and economic migrants as folk-devils - afflicted with disease but fit enough to steal the jobs of hard-working British families - has recently asserted that the first task of a national government is to police and keep secure the boundaries of the state. The nomadism that is an essential element of Orta's vehicle based projects and her temporary shelters provides a direct challenge to the nation-state's imagination of space as static and insular: it is, if you like, a rephrasing of the Romany myth of movement in terms of late-capitalist rather than feudal or early-modern economies. Orta's interventions in space, her creation of communities "in the wrong place" asserts for the invisible, human, subjects of late-capitalism the same rights as are given to the intangible, inhuman flow of capital.

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[1] 'Interview: Nicolas Bourriaud with Lucy Orta' in *Lucy Orta*, (London: Phaidon Press, 2003) pp. 6 – 29.
[2] For the most thorough and intelligent response to the questions raised by Relational Aesthetics see Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' *October*, 110 (Fall 2004) pp. 51 – 79.
[3] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 1970) p. xv.
[4] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' *Diacritics* Vol. 16, no. 1 (spring 1986), pp. 22 – 27.