

AN INTERVIEW WITH

# LUCY ORTA

by  
Reggie McCafferty



*Refuge Wear Intervention, London East End, 1998. Lambda photograph, laminated on Dibond. 170h x 120 cm. Photo by John Akehurst.*









Fig. 1

In the early 90s Lucy Orta left the Parisian fashion houses to begin working as a conceptual and visual artist and formed Studio Orta with her partner Jorge Orta shortly thereafter. Prompted by the outbreak of the Gulf War and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, she began working on *Refuge Wear*, pulling from her experience in design to work with technical fabrics to create sculptures resembling portable habitats.

She would go on to explore the role of the individual in relation to the collective through a series of workshops and interventions which would form later bodies of work, notably *Body Architecture* and *Nexus Architecture*. Studio Orta refers to their work as Operational Aesthetics, placing an emphasis on creating forms that are both representational and utilitarian with a strong emphasis on social engagement.

Her later works, *OrtaWater*, *Life Guards*, and *Antarctica* to name a few, continue this trajectory of questioning human vulnerability, resilience and interdependence while shedding light on and collaborating with marginalized groups such as those who are incarcerated, homeless, and seeking asylum.



Previous page image:  
*Antarctic Village - No Borders*, 2007.  
Ephemeral installation across the Antarctic Peninsula.  
Photo by Thierry Bal.

Lucy and I met, virtually, in May 2025. The following text includes parts from this conversation as Lucy prepares for an installation at the upcoming British Textile Biennial in October 2025, as well as installations at a National Reserve Park in the Puglia region of Italy and the Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Arts.

Fig. 1  
*Body Architecture - Foyer D*, 2002.  
Dome: aluminium coated polyester, 3 telescopic aluminium armatures; 6 Units: Clerpreme Solden lycra, various fabrics, silkscreen print, zippers, 6 armatures.  
510 x 510 x 190cm. Photo by JJ Crance.

Fig. 2  
*Nexus Architecture x 50, Intervention Köln*, 2001.  
Original Lambda colour photograph, laminated (ed. 7).  
150 x 120 cm (Framed 157h x 127 cm).  
Photo by Peter Guenzel.

Fig. 3  
*Refuge Wear - Habitent*, 1992-93. Aluminium coated polyamide, polar fleece, telescopic aluminium poles, whistle, lantern, transport bag, silkscreen print.  
125 x 125 x 125cm. Photo by Pierre Leguillon.

**Q: What have you been working on since we last spoke?**

**A:** We have a retrospective at the British Textile Biennial that's taking place in October. There are about a hundred artists exhibiting, but this year they've dedicated the space to my work in a kind of a retrospective of all the textile pieces I've been working on since the 90s... specifically focusing on all the fabric, architecture and new textile pieces I've been doing with migrant and refugee communities.

The context of the Biennial is interesting. The North of England is what they call the textile triangle: Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds. This was the crux, the heart, of the industrial revolution. It was where Capitalism actually was born out of the trade of cotton, and unfortunately everything that happened around that is all linked to slavery in South America, Brazil, the Caribbean, and then the southern states of the United States. The reason that the Biennial has been established is to address this historic past and the infliction that this industry has had on the world and changes it's made across the globe. So the Biennial looks at the past, but also where the future is going.

I'm making new work for the Biennial, a Bedouin tent, which is going to be a site for gathering. It's a modulus, which is bringing together people to have conversations about England, the future, the move towards the digital, harking back to the hand weaving that was done by the Bedouin communities and the survival strategies that were developed in the desert in order to resist climate change and desertification.

**Q: It's great timing that you're revisiting this work for the Biennial at the same time that we're also exploring it for the magazine...**

**A:** It's a nice alignment. Exactly. I'm looking at tent structures again, but you know, different kinds of tent structures. What were the tent structures that were in the dwellings of the past and how successful were they? I've been meeting with the Bedouin weavers and also Bedouin dwellers to have these conversations. The Bedouin tent I'm making will actually be digitally woven, not hand-loom woven, the way that would have been done traditionally. So I'm also using new technology in order to raise some questions.

**Q: Can you tell me a little about how you began working on *Refuge Wear*?**

**A:** I began making *Refuge Wear* in the early 90s at the outbreak of the first Gulf War. There were humanitarian aid appeals for plastic sheeting and warm clothing, obviously medical supplies too, but I was particularly struck by the calls for plastic sheeting and warm clothing to be parachuted into the populations in need. These were refugee populations that were fleeing Iraq and they had a need to be mobile and a need for a protective layer.

So in response I made the *Habitent*, a tent that could be both an item of clothing like a protective jacket or a protective cape, and at the same time a shelter. But also something that would allow the person to move on, or in general could assist the mobility of populations in distress.

After that I began working to collaborate with homeless people in Paris, because it became apparent that locally I could also begin projects on temporary shelter and

Fig. 3







Fig. 4



precarious living and figure out how this could be used by populations who are actually living on the streets, and whether it was a viable way forward. But these were all prototypes, objects of reflection, and we weren't necessarily saying we were going to house people in them. At the time I was still a designer, but this was how I could respond, this is what I could do as an artist to respond and it was quite interesting that they actually got a lot of publicity at the time - the *Refuge* tent, the *Habitent*.

I was approached by the Blue Helmets (Peacekeepers deployed by the UN) indirectly through a manufacturing company who thought that it could have been useful for the humanitarian organizations for distribution purposes. But it wasn't viable at the time to commercialize it for all kinds of reasons, and I didn't want to go that route because I was leaving design and I wanted to do a much more experimental practice, to be more reactive and more free in order to make more social commentary rather than actually producing it.

Although you could see there were needs and we did distribute pieces to homeless people that needed it but it wasn't to be manufactured on mass. But actually in retrospect this was really early thinking... These mass manufactured goods weren't available in the 90s. With the intensification of manufacturing in Asia, cheaper and

cheaper goods are arriving so it's possible now to distribute tents to the homeless. We now see people living in tents in the street, which people could not imagine at the time, so actually it was kind of prophetic in a way. People thought, "This can't happen, how can we arrive at this?" and the whole point was, "Yes this is what will happen."

**Q: Did this project pull you away from working in the fashion and production line world into more conceptual projects?**

**A:** Definitely yes, because I couldn't reconcile the commercial needs if you like. This is a more humanitarian project, it's a social project, and at the time it was very difficult to imagine that the two could work in parallel. Things have shifted today in fashion but at the time it wasn't possible and I'm quite happy that I did take this route because it took me on the path into the visual arts which allowed for much more experimentation, to become more philosophical and more conceptual with some of the ideas later.

Actually that shift has been very useful because we can identify the art object, the sculpture, as a prototype, a catalyst for others. Then the way I work socially with communities who are affected, refugees or migrants, our process of working together can also be a way to change and shift society. So there's two levels to it, the process

Fig. 6



and the methods of making art, but also the objects that come out of that process can be a catalyst for change. I think we're much freer as artists to shift between these constraints.

**Q: When you work with textile is there a poetic significance to the technical fabrics and materials you're using?**

**A:** Oh yeah, definitely. The technical fabrics were used for metaphorical reasons. Anti-abrasive, anti-UV, anti-radiation, anti-all kinds of things. They're really interesting as a tool to think about states of being.

**Q: How did you move into working on Nexus Architecture? It feels like a logical progression extrapolating the ideas from Refuge Wear but looking deeper into community identity and connectivity.**

**A:** That came through an encounter with [Paul] Virilio through the work he was undertaking with his students at the École Spéciale in Paris on homeless populations. Virilio's research group was looking at structures in allowing for better integration of homeless people, thinking about where you live but also how you access amenities and public services.

So the students had been designing projects with Virilio and he saw the work and thought it was really interesting at the time so we began a conversation which led to him

saying, "While we should be thinking about individual homeless people... What I see is really important today is the breakdown of the social unit, the family unit, and people socially alone. So why don't you think about working on structures in a more community bonding way or community building? How do we as architects and designers think about that in terms of the priority of society?"

So I began looking at social structures and community building and interactions between communities in specific settings, and then began working on these tents that joined people together as opposed to isolating them. Obviously there's a need for an individual refuge, one's individual space, but how can we start joining people together to create some kind of structures that allow for community bonding?

That's how it came about. Before *Nexus Architecture*, there was *Body Architecture*. These are the larger domes that have many appendages and lots of bodies hanging off them. Then in parallel I was also working on this *Nexus Architecture*, with suits that literally joined people together in this very simple nexus, this social link that zippers a group of people together. Figuring out how to walk together, how to just act together, how to be together [laughter].

We began staging *Nexus* interventions in different places.

Fig. 5



Fig. 4  
*Refuge Wear Intervention, London East End, 1998.* Diptych Lambda photograph, laminated on Dibond. 170h x 120 cm each. Photo by John Akehurst.

Fig. 5  
*Nexus Architecture x 110, 2002*  
Installation of 110 Nexus Architecture suits for 110 children ages 4-10 years. (Accompanied by Interventions in USA, France, UK). 900 x 1000 x 200cm.

Fig. 6  
*Modular Architecture - The Dome, 1996.*  
Microporous polyester, diverse textiles, zips, telescopic aluminium structure. Diptych, 300 x 220 x 200cm. Photo by John Akehurst.



We could just pack them in a suitcase and go off and spontaneously gather a group together and say, “We’re a community, we’re bonding, but we can also disconnect,” and create this kind of really interesting chain of humanity.

**Q: What were the responses like from the people who participated?**

**A:** It was really interesting, because in the beginning they’d say, “What happens if we want to disconnect? I’m not sure that I really want to stay here for a long while.” But actually the process of being together was more important. And the fact that you were reliant on the person in front of you or the person behind you gave a different consciousness of being part of a collective body so that was definitely felt amongst the participants. It was almost like there was more negotiation that had to be had between people in the group...“You can’t just hook off mate, we’re in this together.” [laughter] It was really interesting and what happens if you do? Well you’ve got an empty suit in the middle of it somebody else has to fill that. So somebody else would join in.

**Q: With *Collective Dwelling* you begin to fully realise the emphasis on workshops and co-creation as an integral part of your practice. What value do you find in knowledge/skill sharing and how does it expand the reach of the work?**

**A:** The work was talking about people on the fringes and the margins or in the disenfranchised bodies, so it became really important to actually go and work or meet and do things together with the communities. I had done some work with *Nexus Architecture* with different communities but it was restrictive because the format is set... You have a suit and basically you cut the suit. I did some work on customisation of the suits earlier too but it’s always the same template each time.

So we wanted to devise a template that allows for more creativity, and more freedom to interpret the themes of community, of the home, of the body, of one’s place in society. So that’s how *Collective Dwelling* came about and we’re actually still working on a modular format of workshops.

Because I was working with quite vulnerable groups and groups with minimal skills, it seemed it would be easier for us to start with a basic building block like square module and then see what happens to this square module, how it can transform. But at the same time, the square module is like a brick, basically a building block. We can assemble those square modules together and they’ll form a community and each one will represent an individual within that community structure. It was maybe a little bit naive but it worked well with the groups that we were working with.

Then when I went to work with the groups with zero skills it actually was the most basic thing that we could do at the time. Figuring out the different ways to get someone’s idea out of their head and onto a piece of paper and then to create a model of that idea and actually scale that model up to make something larger. That was hugely transformational for everybody. It was really exciting to work through this process of thinking about having something in your mind but actually getting it on paper. It was a whole other kind of skill set and I could see that

my skills were also in this facilitation process. And then also observing how different people see things so differently was quite exciting as well.

**Q: In the fall you also mentioned a project you were working on with Saudi Arabian herbalists and scientists. Are you still working on that?**

**A:** Well, actually, a part of that is being incorporated into the Bedouin tent that I’m making. We made a lot of drawings from plant species in this particular valley in Saudi Arabia, just on the periphery of Riyadh. There’s a valley that’s about 80 kilometers long, a riverbed. It has a particular climate and a particular range of plant species. We’ve collected quite a lot and actually have enhanced that collection with other species from Saudi Arabia, because it’s incredibly biodiverse and really interesting. I’ve used photography and drawing to make the design for the Bedouin tent, which has been digitally woven, so I’ve actually incorporated the drawings of the species onto that. And we’ve made some three dimensional flowers as well, they’re going to be part of a parachute that’s going to be in the Biennial. And we’re still continuing doing the hand embroidery of the species. So I’m making a lot of work with them at the moment.

**Q: What’s the significance of the symbols that are incorporated into the weavings?**

**A:** They’re like signposts. So this vocabulary is this standard kind of vocabulary that’s shared amongst Bedouin communities. Certain symbols denote, for example, a grassland or a certain area where there’s water... they become motifs, an indication of the motifs. And then there are certain constellations indicated that are important for seasonal migration or in a cattle herding or moving on change of seasons.

But I think more than a map, they’re probably storytelling devices used to transmit knowledge, important knowledge that the community will need to know about living in the desert. It’s a lot of storytelling that goes on... stargazing, for example, it’s all about stories, and it’s more easily transmitted orally.

**Q: I think it’s interesting this way of going back to relearn knowledge that has existed for so long, and realizing that somewhere along the way we’ve lost so much of that.**

**A:** Yeah, I guess it’s transmitted differently in the Western cultures through fairy tales and things like that. So there are visual ways of transmission, storytelling ways of transmission, poetry, songs, painting... What’s interesting about the Bedouin weaving is that it’s done by the women. So they have, you know, ownership of this kind of storytelling as well, which is really nice.

**Q: Looking back at your work now from 30 years on, it feels**

Opposite page image:  
*Body Architecture - Collective Wear 4 persons, 1994.*  
Aluminium coated polyamide, microporous polyester,  
telescopic aluminium armatures, grip soles.  
180 x 180 x 150cm. Photo by Philippe Fuzeau.

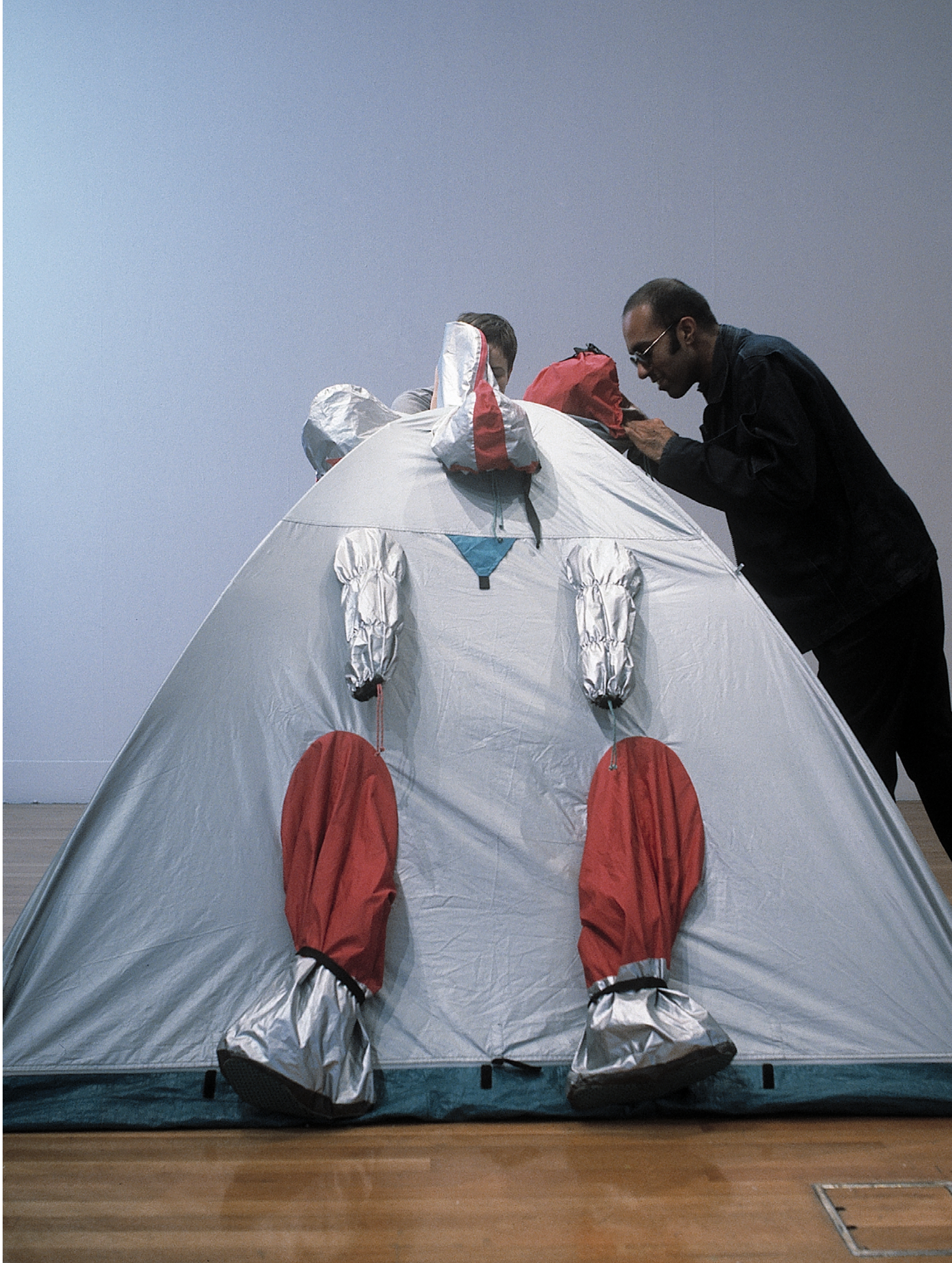






Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 7  
*Antarctic Village - No Borders*, 2007.  
Ephemeral installation across the  
Antarctic Peninsula.  
Photo by Thierry Bal.

Fig. 8  
*Modular Architecture - The Unit x 10  
- Performance*, Fondation Cartier pour  
l'art contemporain, Paris, France, 1996.  
Microporous Polyester, diverse textiles,  
zips, telescopic aluminium structure.  
210 x 1000 x 50cm.  
Photo by John Akehurst.

Fig. 9  
*Refuge Wear Intervention*, London  
East End, 1998. Lambda photograph,  
laminated on Dibond. 170h x 120 cm.  
Photo by John Akehurst.

like there's a strong trajectory through each of the projects. Even now you're still referencing work from that early period when you first moved from fashion into making art. Did it always feel like you had this strong throughline?

**A:** I mean, there are some changes in directions in the projects, like the food projects and the water project. But because they all run for such long periods of time, they all interweave now. It's not like we're doing one and then we're doing the other, things are happening in parallel.

There has also been a huge resurgence in textile led practice and so now it really feels like the time to put the onus on that as well. And that's where my skills are, you know, the knowledge I gained over the last 30 years is experimenting, exploring textiles in the social and ecological dimensions.

**Q:** Do you feel like your early works are just as relevant today as they were when you first began?

**A:** Yes. I've been writing a large grant and it's partly under embargo, but the whole point is to look at the significance the tent has taken on today. If you think about tents in terms of extreme refugee situations, conflicts that are taking place at the moment, the precarious living. I think even more so, tents have become an emblem of the 21st century.

There's the Za'atari camp in Jordan, 80,000 people living there. They might not be living in tents but it's precarious living. The tents in Palestine made with blankets and rubble and sheeting, I think it's an incredibly significant emblem of the 21st century, unfortunately, in that way. But thinking about, what is the role of the tent? What is the role of the tent in climate change? The necessity to return to nomadic dwelling.

**Q:** What would you say to young artists that you are teaching or working with on projects who feel a sense of hopelessness at our current historical moment?

**A:** Small gestures count. And it's the build up of those small gestures that is important. So it's not to abandon after the first round, you've got to carry on. The artist's trajectory is a long trajectory and we'll only see the results after 50 years or something. So there's a long slog in it, don't give up.

#### Upcoming Exhibitions:

*Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2025*. London, UK (17 June - 17 Aug 2025) | *Permanent installation - Il Nido*. ArtePollino, Latronico, Italy (21 June) | *30th Anniversary*. Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, USA (5 Sept - 25 Oct 2025) | *Histories of Ecology*. MASP, Sao Paulo, Brazil (5 Sept 2025 - 1 Feb 2026) | *5th Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art*. Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou, China (23 Sept - 26 Oct 2025) | *British Textile Biennial 2025*. East Lancashire, UK (2 Oct - 2 Nov.2025) | *Migrations et Climat*. Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris, France (15 Oct 2025 - 5 Apr 2026)

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