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## Lucy Orta: Adorned in Ideas

### Lucy Orta: Protective Wear

For the British artist [Lucy Orta](#), the garment is certainly not about the whims of fashion or the elitist audiences of haute couture. Instead, the garment is employed as an interdisciplinary research model to project social commentary and stage what Orta has coined public “interventions.” In some ways akin to performance art, these interventions take Orta’s three-dimensional designs into unscripted public spaces such as housing estates and subway stations to “demonstrate solidarity, not to any particular cause, but poetically.” To the uninitiated, Orta’s work may look like it belongs in a North Face sale catalogue for production seconds: sleeping bags include mini tents for the head; arm pockets protrude every which way; jumpsuits link four or five abreast and the same number deep to create an “organism” that, once donned, pulls and lurches as it seems to seek the unity of military marching ranks. Or does it? Rather than impose homogeneity, these works readily acknowledge social and physical vulnerability and the need for both individual and group protection.

Born in 1966, Orta studied fashion design at [Nottingham Trent University](#) in Britain, graduating in 1989 and working for a time in fashion forecasting. In the early 1990s, she moved to Paris, where she continues to share a studio with her husband, Jorge Orta, and began work on the Refuge Wear series. These early garments, which were exhibited in fall 2005 at The Curve, [Barbican Art Gallery](#), London, look to be part of a disaster plan—either implemented or abandoned—and offer solutions for the individual in times of distress. Recycled military gear and synthetic fabrics abound: shiny but sensible gray, with touches of emergency red or glow-in-the-dark yellow that further the atmosphere of impending calamity. There is a sense that everything is at the very least waterproof, if not disease- and chemical-repellent as well. What these garments could protect the wearer from looms large on our horizons today with the legacies of 9/11, the 2005 hurricane season, and even the potential Asian bird-flu pandemic.

From works that attempt to assist the individual during times of crisis, Orta has moved to the design of interlinking garments to be worn around the world in peaceful demonstrations. Over the past decade, these demonstrations have taken place as far afield as South Africa, Australia, Bolivia, Mexico and the United States. Numerous videos and photographs document the garments’ evolution from sculpture to performance art. As “interventions,” they take on different shapes and sizes, almost limitlessly adaptable, all projecting the spectacle of physical solidarity. But rather than serve as a platform for the maker’s own agenda, Orta’s interventions offer a tool to project a community voice.

A more recent work, Connector Body Architecture, looks to be one giant sleeping bag that extends right up to the ceiling, while Urban Life guards #0317 is composed of interlocked garments printed with phrases such as “are we ready for the worst” and “true peace is not only the absence of armed violence but a truly passive existence —St. Augustin.” In these works and many others, there is a tension between a sense of community and comfort and a sense of entrapment. But within this conflict is the suggestion that the garment can aid in physical as well as emotional survival by overcoming isolation and voicelessness.

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