



**LUCY
+ JORGE
ORTA**

**FOOD
WATER
LIFE**

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FOOD

Food Service: Setting the Table

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Imagine a plain white dinner plate. Printed on the edge is the simple icon of a Red Cross ambulance. If you flip over the plate, searching for a clue or explanation, you will find a full-color press photo showing a scene of displacement, famine, or poverty. One is a portrait of African refugees, their arms burdened with empty water jugs. A thin red crosshair cuts through the image.

The ambulance plate is from a set of seven, produced in an edition of thirty-five in 2002 by Lucy + Jorge Orta for *70 x 7 The Meal*, a series of large group dinners held in public places around the world. The setting, guest list, menu, and plates change from meal to meal, but key elements link the dinners into an ongoing endeavor. Each meal is served on special dishes, some conceived for the event and some borrowed from previous gatherings. A custom-printed fabric runner unifies the banquet tables with a ribbon of color, stretching for hundreds of meters through a cityscape, around a monument, or inside a gallery. Servers wear lime-green, screen-printed aprons. Seven guests invite seven other guests, the group multiplying to populate the scene with people from different social groups: artists, politicians, patrons, farmers, activists, and neighbors. The printed pieces—plates, aprons, table covers—anchor the occasion around a layered language of images and objects. The art lies in the social gathering, pinned into memory by artifacts designed for functions both poetic and mundane.

As a design critic and curator, I am drawn to the collision of ordinary purpose and extraordinary meaning in the work of Lucy + Jorge Orta. In project after project, useful objects mix and propagate to create dynamic assemblies of people, places, and things. Each project channels energy from familiar objects to fuel social experience, trading up the currency of familiarity to change the way we look at everyday life processes.

How does an apron function? At its most basic level, it shields the wearer, protecting the clothes worn underneath. As a social symbol, the apron serves as a uniform, a badge of duty that conveys status and responsibility. It is a unifying mark that ties one event to others.

How does a tablecloth function? Like an apron, its practical purpose is to conceal and protect. Symbolically, it cloaks a plain surface with the trappings of ceremony. At a large group function, it connects a legion of separate tables, unifying space with color, turning many into one.

How does a plate function? Again, like the apron and the tablecloth, it is a membrane of separation between the clean and the unclean. It cradles and divides, protecting the food it holds from the surface underneath. It marks a personal space, distancing people while bringing them together with a shared pattern. A plate conveys messages and meaning using shape, materials, and ornament to speak about taste, history, and custom.

A well-dressed table elevates the status of any occasion, changing how people behave and what they will remember. Table settings transform eating into dining, an orchestrated social ritual. Amplifying the familiar signifiers of decorum, Lucy + Jorge Orta strive to set the table with unexpected intensity. Aprons and runners become banners or flags, vivid beacons that lead the charge rather than holding back in servitude. Dinner plates arrive laden with semiotic abundance: text, diagrams, icons, and voluptuous drawings of hearts and artichokes, symbols of human aspiration that speak to the difficulty, says Lucy, of “reaching the center.”

Leftovers

Lucy Orta started experimenting with food service in her 1996 project *All in One Basket*, for which she gathered discarded produce from Paris street markets to make into pickles and jams. At the end of each market day, vendors throw damaged, unsold fruits and vegetables into the gutters, where they are washed away as refuse. Orta began collecting and preserving this condemned produce, packing her home-brewed concoctions in glass jars labeled with the food’s urban provenance. She displayed these reclaimed foodstuffs in various ways, including in simple wooden boxes lined with dramatic photographs of abundance and waste. In another piece, she used a single eight-foot-long shelf to organize a row of jars into a linear record of the seasons, from cherries in May to eggplants in November.

Seeking to engage audiences more directly, Orta invited a famous Parisian pâtissier, Stohrer, to create jams and purees to share with the public. The project was hosted in 1997 by a small gallery located in a church near Les Halles, formerly the site of a major fruit and vegetable market, now a shopping mall. While the public sampled the reclaimed food products out on the street, the gallery displayed boxed reliquaries and mobile pantries equipped with audio recordings of gleaners Orta had met on the street. Most of these gleaners were poor, while some were students and others were people who simply stopped to pick up food off the ground. Some homeless people dismissed the practice altogether, explaining that gleaning is only for those rich enough to have a refrigerator and a place to keep their found provisions.

Wasted food is hardly unique to Paris. Grocers and street vendors in prosperous societies around the world routinely discard milk, bread, produce, and other foods that are deemed unfit for sale or simply in over-supply. Sellers commonly pulp or contaminate unsold food, destroying it lest it diminish demand for fresher goods. Saving food for those too poor to shop requires a system for collection and distribution—it takes effort to recover value from a bruised apple or a redundant cucumber. The city of Munich provides bins to help vendors salvage and sort refuse, while New York’s City Harvest, a private organization, delivers food from restaurants to shelters

and soup kitchens. For *HortiRecycling*, a project in Vienna, Lucy Orta provided market vendors with brightly colored, screen-printed totes, which served as handy food-recycling receptacles for the vendors while advertising the process as it took place. Lucy and Jorge created mobile kitchens out of shopping carts and utilitarian hardware elements that enabled them to collect, clean, and cook food right on the street when hooked up to water and electricity in the marketplace.

Trigger Objects

As in many Studio Orta projects, *HortiRecycling* and *All in One Basket* yielded a variety of constructed objects—rolling carts, mobile kitchens, and shelves stocked with preserved vegetables—as well as live social engagements. Primitive kitchens appear in other Orta projects as well, including *Antarctica*, an ambitious expedition that used the accoutrements of Antarctic exploration to speak of rootless existence in a not-yet-sovereign territory. *Antarctica* includes a series of parachutes laden with emergency supplies, including a floating kitchen that bears clattering clumps of cooking utensils.

Such physical objects concretize the Ortas’ social activities, serving as physical repositories of events. Each object provides an additional way for people to engage in the process of the work, whether viewing it in a gallery or purchasing it to take home. While larger-scale objects play a role in the collectors’ market and the museum world, Lucy + Jorge Orta’s smaller items are affordable to people who might not otherwise purchase a work of contemporary art. A dinner plate or a jar of pickles offers a lasting memento of an event intended to change perceptions of everyday activities (eating, dining, cooking, shopping).

These simple objects resemble everyday things with everyday functions, while the more elaborate constructions (tents, garments, life jackets, architectural structures) often have little or no real utility, employing forms and materials in excess of what might be needed to complete a task. In an interview with Lucy Orta, curator Nicolas Bourriaud suggested the term “functioning aesthetics” to describe the studio’s work, but she interjected the phrase “operational aesthetics” instead. The French word *fonctionnel* is equivalent to the English word “functioning,” thus bearing connotations of blunt instrumentality and lacking any dimension of poetic surplus and cultural critique. The Ortas’ began using the word “operational” in connection with their ongoing project *OPERATION Life Nexus*, an endeavor that uses workshops and large-scale projects to raise awareness of organ donation around the world. “Opera” suggests a larger collaboration with curators, scientists, technical experts, and others. “Operation” suggests an open process, perhaps with unknown results—a sequence of possible actions rather than a solution to a given problem.

Lucy Orta is often asked if she is a designer. Her answer, insistently, is no. And yet the studio's methodology bears strong affinities with design practice, and Orta is no stranger to the profession. She trained as a fashion designer at Nottingham Trent University and worked professionally in Paris for more than a decade, specializing in knitwear for men. Jorge Orta studied simultaneously at the faculty of fine arts (1972–79) and the faculty of architecture (1973–80) of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario in Argentina. Many of the Ortas' project drawings resemble design drawings, with detailed instructions to be executed by a fabricator, complete with measurements and material samples.

Despite Lucy's strenuous disavowal of the field today, she is a model and inspiration for many designers. She is a professor of Art, Fashion and the Environment at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, and her work has been featured in numerous volumes on experimental fashion. From 2002 to 2005 she was head of the Man & Humanity master's course at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, where her colleagues included Hella Jongerius and other leading designers. Jongerius, whose projects range from stitched ceramics and soft silicone vases to factory-made dinner plates with built-in flaws and irregularities, seeks to upend expectations about how materials behave. While Jongerius focuses on the physicality of material goods, the Ortas address their social effects. The objects are not ends in themselves, but rather "trigger objects" designed to function as social catalysts, moving people to think and act in new ways about familiar processes. While Jongerius puzzles over the sculptural form a dinner plate, the Ortas treat their dishes as generic blanks. The basic plate form selected for the ongoing 70 x 7 project has no articulated rim, offering up a seamless ground for text and image. As physical objects the plates are elegant but interchangeable; variations result from context and conversation, food and message.

Studio Orta is sometimes identified with "relational aesthetics," a term coined by Bourriaud to describe anti-monumental art practices based in everyday social activities. A key figure for Bourriaud is Rirkrit Tiravanija, who began cooking and serving Thai food inside gallery spaces in the early 1990s, as well as Gordon Matta-Clark, who founded the restaurant Food in 1971. Matta-Clark's legendary meals included *Bones*, a repast consisting of frogs' legs, oxtail soup, and roasted marrow bones. Such works emphasize art's capacity as a publicly consumed, socially shared experience. Studio Orta takes that experience out of the gallery and onto the street (or into the canal, the prison, the natural history museum, or the frozen landscape of Antarctica). The first 70 x 7 meal took place in the French town of Dieuze in 2000. A local youth center wanted to bring together people from the town and asked Lucy + Jorge Orta to participate. A tablecloth, screen-printed by hand in the artists' studio on long rolls

of nylon fabric, snaked through the town, tying together dozens of tables into one vast communal picnic. The event was advertised via newspaper to the village's three thousand residents, and streets were closed to traffic. All guests received tickets entitling them to buy their own dinner plates if desired. Although the organizers initially objected to the idea using and selling real china dishes (too expensive, too difficult), more than 750 plates were sold, attesting to the enthusiasm of the guests and their eagerness to hold on to the experience.

Since then, each meal has pursued its own social and culinary agenda. An event focused on foraging featured *panna cotta* made with algae as a thickening agent as well as a variety of roots and greens gathered from local fields and forests. A dinner held in collaboration with Italy's Fondazione Slow Food focused on the plight of the Andean potato, a threatened staple of Argentina's local economy. Staged in the restored Venaria Reale, a regal palace in Turin, the event featured tables piled with carrots, potatoes, peppers, garlic, celery, zucchini, and more. During the dinner, a team of cooks cut and trimmed the vegetables, packing bags for guests to carry home and make into their own soup.

The most spectacular dinner in the series has been planned and visualized but not yet held: spanning London's Millennium Bridge, the dinner would cross the Thames with a continuous, red-clothed dinner table, linking two halves of the city via a shared meal. After breaching the river, the tables would meander through other public areas, seating upwards of five thousand guests. Commissioned by ixia, a public art think tank in the United Kingdom, the project exists through written plans and carefully simulated photomontages, published in book form as a kind of model or manual for how to conceive and execute a large-scale urban art project.

A Seasonal Practice

While the London dinner party remains, for now, a virtual proposal, most Studio Orta projects are resolutely concrete. The couple's artistic enterprise revolves around a hands-on studio life. In contrast, many artists today work primarily from their computers, arranging the fabrication of pieces via phone and email and relying heavily on galleries to store their work and look after the details of shipping and installation. Although the Ortas' pieces are fabricated in part by specialists in metalwork, porcelain manufacture, and tent-making, most pieces are finished by hand in their studio spaces, which include a reclaimed dairy in the Brie region east of Paris and a small building near their home in the city.

The dairy, built in the late 1900s as one of the first industrial dairies in France, is now the site of a new kind of industry. It serves as a shipping dock, storage unit, and screen-printing workshop, as well as the site for woodworking, plaster casting, painting, and

assembling. One small room in the dairy is stocked with box after box of carefully labeled plates from the dinner series, available for purchase by collectors or for use in future 7 x 70 meals where funds aren't available to produce custom plates. The Ortas are also leading the development of a pair of former paper mills—Moulin de Boissy and Moulin Sainte-Marie, located three kilometers from the dairy—into a state-of-the-art network of galleries, artist studios, a research center, and public parks, giving this rural community a new identity and revived economic opportunities. Meanwhile, the unheated dairy has minimal amenities, making it usable only in warm weather. Thus the Ortas write, draw, and think in the winter and build, print, and assemble in the summer, working with a team of assistants who come and go as the weather changes. Following an intense cycle keyed to the seasons, Studio Orta is a family-run farm whose produce happens to be contemporary art.

The Ortas' public dinners and experimental kitchens coincide with a renewed worldwide interest in the politics of food. Communities around the world—working from the scale of global food networks down to local methods for farming and cooking—are seeking ways to make the food system better serve the needs of people and the planet. After decades of success in the production of massive quantities of cheap food, policymakers and citizens are recognizing the environmental and social cost of this process. The over-industrialization of food has forced small farms to surrender to agribusiness, reduced biodiversity in favor of monoculture crops, and assaulted communities with debilitating chronic diseases. Studio Orta illuminates issues of scarcity and waste while drawing people into a reflective experience of eating, drinking, cooking, and dining. The experience is a collective one, engaging individuals in a public process.

