



**LUCY
+ JORGE
ORTA**

**FOOD
WATER
LIFE**

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WATER

Life Science: *OrtaWater*

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Increasingly, Studio Orta has focused their practice on environmental concerns. “We look to tackle issues not being addressed as much as they should be,” asserts Lucy Orta. The social and environmental challenges facing the Earth’s natural water resources has continued to be a topic of discussion in their work. The life-supporting properties of water need not be explained—it is one of the world’s most valuable resources. However, water has become a subject of much debate and concern in recent decades as natural resources are being rapidly consumed. Although water covers about two-thirds of the Earth’s surface, only 3 percent of this amount is freshwater, and about two-thirds of that is ice. Much of the remainder is locked underground.¹ Therefore, a mere fraction of a percent of the Earth’s water supports all life on land. Water is also an issue for underprivileged communities. The statistics are staggering: it has been estimated that about a billion people still do not have access to clean water across the globe.

Much of the Ortas’ work is driven by issues of survival and safety, and for that reason water has been as a subtext for many of their projects, including *70 x 7 The Meal*, *HortiRecycling*, and *Antarctic Village—No Borders*, a recent project where Jorge Orta and a team of photographers and filmmakers trekked to this remote area of the world, where the problem of climate change is increasingly giving cause for serious concern. However, in *DrinkWater*, the exhibition they devised for the fifty-first Venice Biennale in 2005, the issue of water took center stage. An invitation by the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, a contemporary art center along the Grand Canal in Venice, to develop a new body of work—*OrtaWater*—seemed the ideal setting for a project that dealt with water. Together with students from Fabbrica—a research center in Treviso, Italy—Studio Orta developed a series of interactive works exploring water purification, distribution, and consumption.

Envisioning a time when freshwater might be so scarce that we would need to develop new solutions for extracting, cleaning, and processing it from our local waterways, Lucy + Jorge Orta took advantage of the waterside setting of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and utilized its galleries almost like a factory. They set up a small production plant that pumped water from the Grand Canal into a purification system developed by Italian engineers, which used a kit-of-parts of ideas drawn from earlier works, such as the process units for *HortiRecycling*, as well as newly developed elements. The result was a complex network of tubes, containers, and pumping mechanisms, all of which alluded to and made visible the process of water extraction, storage, cleansing, and distribution. As part of the project, the water from the canal, once cleaned, was bottled and distributed to gallery visitors in specially created, reusable glass bottles. A souvenir edition of the project, the bottles also made reference to the privatization of many of the world’s freshwater sources.

In addition to developing the water purification plant in Venice, *OrtaWater* was later tested out again in Rotterdam, at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, with water filtered from the adjacent Amstel River. Here, Studio Orta worked with students from the Willem de Kooning Academie, the Delft University of Technology, and the Design Academy in Eindhoven—all schools in the Netherlands—to generate research projects that would provide real data about water shortage and waste. In a section of the gallery, metal water gourds—some pierced with holes as a metaphor for water waste and loss—were stamped with bar codes that visitors could scan to access information, including statements from world leaders such as Kofi Annan (“Water is likely to be a growing source of tension and fierce competition between nations, if present trends continue, but it can also be a catalyst for cooperation.”) as well as horrifying predictions (“By 2050, the number of countries facing water stress or scarcity could rise to 54, with their combined population being 4 billion people—about 40 percent of the projected global population of 9.4 billion.”)

Although much of the Ortas’ output is ephemeral (performances, interventions, and installations) and lives on through photography, film, and video, there is a body of materials (objects, sculptures, and drawings) generated for each project that is equally essential, acting as both independent artworks but also as extensions to their installations and events, as symbolic signifiers of the issues at the heart of their work. Rather than serving as stand-alone components, these elements form part of an integrated system, a chain of works that build on one another, strengthening their ideas. At once representations of the conceptual thinking behind a project, they are nonetheless plausible solutions made apparent by their functional properties. For *OrtaWater*, for example, Lucy and Jorge generated a series of objects incorporating visual elements drawn from throughout their oeuvre that were embedded with issues relating to survival, safety, security, and the necessity for transportable solutions that can reach communities in need. They included *Urban Life Guards*—wearable garments hung with metal flasks or attached to stretchers and life preservers—as well as *Mobile Intervention Units*, made from bicycles, canoes, even several Piaggio Ape 50 three-wheeled vehicles, and equipped with plastic jerrycans, buckets, sinks, and water pipes. Crafted from found and customized objects, these pieces had a do-it-yourself quality that demonstrated how we can all contribute on some level, however small, to issues of global concern with home-grown solutions. The Ortas assert that their work is founded on a belief that “the individual creative potential of people needs to be fully acknowledged. By recognizing this potential and harnessing it through our work, we aim to mobilize an increasingly wide audience in actively supporting and providing solutions to world problems, whether they are ecological, political, humanitarian, or economic.”

In addition to the collection of objects, a series of drawings accompanied *OrtaWater* based on the same principles and directives of the objects, and consisted of visual imagery taken from the project’s key themes. These images included water bottles, tricycles, boats, cooking utensils, life preservers, and clothing. Together, these objects represented human effort and participation. Using a lexicon of two- and three-dimensional signs and symbols that are repeated throughout their work, Lucy and Jorge provide a frame or context for their ideas that is readily and universally understandable. These images and objects surpass linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries, encouraging dialogue and debate across a wide range of people. Rather than being explicit or absolute in their meanings, they are purposefully open-ended to encourage interpretation on multiple levels based on their associated parts.

As theorists Carlo Vezzoli and Ezio Manzini have noted, “The preconditions for sustainability [in] our society, and hence the lives of our and future generations, depends on the long-term functioning of the complicated ecosystems that we happen to simply call nature... where neither on a planetary nor on a regional level do human activities disturb the natural cycles more than planetary resilience allows, and at the same time do not impoverish the natural capital that has to be shared with future generations.”² This thinking is at the heart of many of Studio Orta’s projects. What makes *OrtaWater* so relevant is that it addresses an issue of increasing concern to daily life: water. By focusing on this essential topic, an area that is often overlooked or taken for granted, Lucy + Jorge Orta position themselves at the forefront of contemporary discussions, ensuring their work remains a pertinent platform for exploration and debate.

By bringing together expertise from multiple fields as well as several years of research undertaken by their own studio, and by following their now tried-and-tested, multifaceted approach—combining workshops, objects, photography, and installations—Studio Orta make clear their determination and commitment to probing issues of import to people globally. Often labor-intensive, this integrated method of working enables them to create work that is taken seriously on a conceptual level, as well as to suggest credible solutions to issues such as water preservation, distribution, and consumption. Ultimately, what makes projects such as *OrtaWater* stand out is that rather than being a series of individual elements, the combined production of a single project provides a powerful set of tools that helps strengthen their message and contribute to the larger narrative embedded within all of their output: the social and cultural well-being of people worldwide.

NOTES

- 1 <http://water.org/learn-about-the-water-crisis/facts/>.
- 2 Carlo Vezzoli and Ezio Manzini, *Design for Environmental Sustainability* (London: Springer Verlag, 2008), 6.