



Lucy  
Orta

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Traces:  
Stories of  
Migration

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“Processes are also metaphors. They are powerful containers of meaning.”  
– Jeff Kelly

*Traces: Stories of Migration* builds on the practice research I have been undertaking alongside the broader practice Studio Orta over the last thirty years to bring attention to issues surrounding migration and displacement; and specifically, how cloth and stitch as a language are intimately connected to our personal identities, memories, and emotions.

In the early 1990s, in response to the social and political climate, I shifted my practice as a fashion designer to that of a visual artist. My first experimental works, *Refuge Wear and Body Architecture* explored ways in which the metaphorical property of technical textiles and clothing could express the vulnerability of the human body. In these textile sculptures, clothing transforms into shelters and the fabric architecture forms a protective skin to bear witness. These works were a response to the forced displacement of populations provoked by the Gulf War of 1991 where an estimated 1.5 million people were displaced from their homes in Kuwait, Iraq, and neighbouring countries. In the sudden and unexpected uprooting of a life with no belongings except for a few items of clothing that provide a thin wall against extreme and hostile environments, cloth is the membrane between life and death.

Throughout the mid-1990s I worked with small groups of marginalised communities, including homeless adults, migrant workers, hostel residents, and prisoners, to foreground issues of exclusion, discrimination, fragility, visibility and social acceptance to challenge the distance between artists and society and advocate for a more connected, engaged, and socially responsible approach. The American social practice artist Suzanne Lacy describes this form of making art as a “new genre of public art”<sup>1</sup>. Over the following two decades with Studio Orta, in collaboration with multidisciplinary specialists, and diverse communities, we continued exploring broader social and environmental topics such as food distribution (*Hortirecycling and 70x7 The Meal*, 1996-2000), access to clean water (*OrtaWater and Clouds*, 2005-2013), freedom of movement (*Antarctica*, 2007), and biodiversity loss (*Amazonia*, 2009). We were making art with the unconditional belief that by rendering visible the challenges our planet was facing, devising participatory and collaborative ways of working, and *calls to action*, we could change the course of things. And the same unconditional belief underpins today, *Traces: Stories of Migration*.

According to the IOM, in 2015, over one million people attempted the journey from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe<sup>2</sup>. In April the same year, the BBC reported the loss of 800 migrants off the coast of Libya. In response to the horrific plight of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, I developed the premise for an exhibition that would unite artists who have dedicated their practice to rendering visible the cultural and social experience of migrants, or those consistently engaged with refugees or asylum seekers. The exhibition created a network of resonance between the artworks originating from different contexts, recounting the stories of people directly or indirectly affected by migration, their journeys from one country, language, culture, and conviction; from one period in life to another, the movement across geological times; as well as the search for protection and shelter, and natural conditions such as a sense of place or belonging. The exhibition adopted the title *Passagens* a Portuguese word referring to passages or transitions, changes or shifts from one phase or situation to another, often with a sense of progression, and punctuated by pivotal moments or turning points. I would specifically like to acknowledge the research undertaken by co-curators Anne-Maire Melster and Camilla Palestra, which greatly expanded my reference points, introducing me to the work of my peers Ursula Biemann, Amar Kanwar, Bouchra Khalil, Emily Jacir, Bindu Mehra, Andrea Luka-Zimmermann and many more. *Passagens* prompted a shift in my practice, returning to the embedded approach of community engagement with a focus on the language of stitching and the medium of cloth as a means through which the human condition is discussed, shared, and expressed collectively.

The increase in migration into Europe that came to a head in 2015 greatly contributed to the rise of nationalist sentiments and anti-immigrant rhetoric in many countries in Europe and beyond and was a significant factor in the lead-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK. I had been living in France since 1990, and when the United Kingdom officially left the European Union on January 31st, 2020, I became a foreigner in my birth country, forcing me to sever the union with my home and family, my 'patrie'. I lost my sense of belonging. The question posed was how to combat the pernicious spread of xenophobia and advocate for an even more connected, engaged, and socially responsible approach to making art. Thus, *Traces: Stories of Migration* is not limited to the physical act of abandoning a home but also the psychological and emotional impact of the move, the indelible marks left as a consequence of the uprooting – the leaving behind of loved ones and familiar surroundings that can lead to feelings of displacement and disorientation.

In considering ways in which I could render visible these conditions, my research practice at the University of the Arts London (UAL) focused on the diverse community of London's East End with its history and heritage linked to the cloth and garment industry. Constant waves of immigration, from the Huguenots during the 17th and 18th centuries, to the Jewish communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by a wave of immigration from the Caribbean in the 1940s, and Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, brought unique cultures and traditions that have become woven into the tapestry of the East End. This rich and diverse heritage contradicts the campaign's negative stereotype of the migrant, exacerbated by Brexit and still resonant at the present time.

With the aim to challenge the negative narrative using my practice as a catalyst, I approached London College of Fashion's Making for Change, part of The Portal Trust for Social Impact (UAL). Making for Change had recently established a third training and manufacturing unit in the Poplar district of east London and was seeking to build on their outreach and develop new relationships with local community organisations. I drew up a methodology for engaging with migrant communities across east London which included oral storytelling, written and visual mapping, exchanging knowledge, formulating ideas, and realising creative outcomes. With Making for Change project manager Jo Reynolds, we devised a seven-week programme of workshops where participants felt encouraged to share their own stories and experiences, as well as listen and learn from others.

As Jeff Kelley has asserted, "Processes are also metaphors. They are powerful containers of meaning"<sup>3</sup>. *Traces: Stories of Migration* is as much about the relationship between an artist's voice and community voices expressed in their work as is a metaphorical process of a community of people, reflecting and shaping our understanding of the world around us. Building on learning from Studio Orta projects of the mid-1990s and the more recent 'Procession Banners 1918-2028' realised with women prisoners in the Making for Change unit at HMP Downview, in 2018, I would like to suggest that *Traces: Stories of Migration* presents a new model of social engagement. The dialogical structure of the community activities not only empowered participants promoting empathy, understanding, and connection among participants, helping to build a sense of shared identity; it also guided distinct individual outcomes. I value these outcomes as metaphorical containers.

Out of the eighty participants involved in the workshops, seventy-seven created a personal 'Story Cloth' an individual artwork in textiles, as a common medium. Author Nathalie Abi-Ezzi



*Traces: Stories of Migration, community workshops, 2021-2022.*

who was initially employed to assist participants with redacting personal or family stories has written a book of poetry inspired by the stories we shared. The portraits of each participant in the 'Portrait Gallery' are my response to the process. The unique characteristics of each person are rendered in organza layers, the machine embroidery tracing the contours, and printed textiles, hand embroidery and beadworks applied to give form to each person's 'passagem'. As artist Alice Kettle postulates, "Textiles, the use and production of cloth, tell the story of the everyday, of histories and of social and political structures. Textiles speak about lives through their formal qualities, their material substance, and their social context. They transmit the transformative potential of making, the enduring traditional stories, ..."<sup>14</sup>

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1. Lacy, S. (1995). *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art*. Seattle: Bay Press.
2. International Organization for Migration. (2015). *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost During Migration*. Geneva, Switzerland: IOM.
3. Kelley, J. (cited in Lacy, S. (ed.) 1995). *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Seattle: Bay Press, p. 45.
4. Kettle, A. & Koumis, T. (2022). 'Creativity'. In *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook* (pp. 77-86). Liverpool University Press.

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