

Title, Bridges and Doors: Some Thoughts on Lucy Orta's *Connector* Project

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There is a growing movement within the social sciences, particularly in planning, urban studies and anthropology, away from universalizing conceptions of society and towards relational ones. Care is taken not to impose belief systems that are “alien” and have no meaning within the contexts being studied. The fact that Orta has undertaken *Connector* projects in places as widely dispersed as Florence, Melbourne, Brussels, Quebec, Florida, Tokyo and Edinburgh, with people from those cultures, means that, from the outset, she incorporates into her practice what Pierre Restany eloquently calls “relational aesthetics.”¹ The collaborative discussions, the design and stylistic directions as well as the fabrication may be guided by the Orta “template,” if you like, but the adaptability of every project to each individual context is vital to its identity as a constituent part of *Connector*. The bringing into being of works around the world under the *Connector* title not only makes invisible and unconnected creative ideas manifest and tangible in ways that bring together the groups working on each piece of the jigsaw, but also sets up a “relational aesthetic” across countries and continents. The *Connector* projects, among others, have become strategies for giving value back to groups (such as children, the urban poor, criminals) in a strikingly original way. It is not surprising that the work of such artists as Mierle Laderman Ukeles—despite the formal differences—is occasionally viewed as having similar intentions to those of Orta’s work: one of Ukeles’ most notable public art projects, for example, was systematically to shake the hands of every New York sanitation worker. Suzi Gablik’s passing reference elsewhere to Ukeles’ work is interesting, too, in this context: “I think that beauty comes in more forms than what is apprehended by the disembodied eye. It doesn’t have to be something you look at. Beauty can also be something that touches your heart, something that is moving [. . .] like Mierle Ukeles shaking the hands of all those sanitation workers [. . .] in making contact with them she was building a bridge to them. That seems very beautiful to me.”² Without passing over the aspect of “beautiful actions” of which Gablik speaks, and which I think is a vital part of Orta’s project, the more immediate phrase here, of building bridges, is equally important to Orta and has been commented on many times before. Similarly, the early urbanist writings of George Simmel (in particular “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 1903) have been cited in connection with Orta. However, it is Simmel’s essay “Bridge and Door” that most perfectly provides an intellectual context for *Connector*. The essay ends thus: “Because the human being is the connecting creature who must always separate and cannot connect without separating—that is why we must first conceive intellectually of the merely indifferent existence of two river banks as something separated in order to connect them by means of a bridge. And the human being is likewise the bordering creature who has no border. The enclosure of his or her domestic being by the door means, to be sure, that they have separated out a piece from the uninterrupted unity of natural being. But just as the formless limitation takes on a shape, its limitedness finds its significance and dignity only in that which the mobility of the door illustrates: in the possibility at any moment of stepping out of this limitation into freedom.”³ The door and the bridge that Simmel sought to explain in human terms is precisely the “protocol” in Orta’s design, the connecting zippered door/bridge between simultaneously independent and interdependent people. We are by nature always connecting and separating.

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One important aspect of the linear modules of the *Connector*, according to the artist, is that it is possible for individuals to connect or, importantly, disconnect from the sequence. The implication would seem to be that Orta is not only interested in creating new communities of connectivity between individuals, but, equally, that the element of freedom of choice is expressly encouraged. Put another way, the ability to leave is on a level with the ability to join (like Simmel’s creature who cannot connect without separating). To some extent this is further validated by the body architectures being inhabitable and supportive of survival, as if the clothing would help subsistence, through providing tools, pockets and materials that offer protection and sustenance in isolation. In this context, we might also consider the benefits of leaving collectivities, for instance to permit moments of solitude or self-imposed isolation.

Raising this point at all might seem slightly perverse, given the amount of critical attention that has been directed at Orta as an artist who celebrates social values, sharing and making connections. Similarly, her work seems actively to oppose the Baudelairian idea of the city as a place of isolation and disinterest. Nevertheless, being alone, particularly within a culture, carries strong Romantic connotations, which date back at least as far as William Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," from the early nineteenth century, as described by child psychologist D. W. Winnicott in his essay "The Capacity to be Alone" (1958). Anthony Storr's classic study "Solitude" (1988) brought a lot of this thinking brilliantly into focus: "It seems to me that what goes on in the human being when he [sic] is by himself is as important as what happens in his interactions with other people."⁴ Now Orta's work is clearly collaborative and involving, but it is worth underlining that it is still an artist's creative practice and that there is a single individual, Lucy Orta, at the center of the network keeping the structures together, determining how they will expand and move on and exemplifying that, in this case at least, and despite appearances, the author is certainly not dead.

A corollary of the linear modularity that is part of *Connector* and determines whether one becomes attached or unattached, is the responsibility that one must assume if one is in the middle of the chain. Like an intricate social network, it is not possible to remove oneself from a system without consequences. A person in the middle of the chain deciding to disconnect may leave those behind them isolated from others in the group and the central dome structure.

All of this is to some extent circumspect as *Connector*, as objects and performances, do not immediately seem to articulate a sense of isolation as much as connection. However, it is a powerful part of the *Connector* project that in bringing in metaphorical parallels from social patterns of behavior, one is also allowing in the paradoxes and perturbing issues that contemporary society presents to each of us. Isolation within urban contexts, and the power of isolation for artistic practice, are just two of the issues that stand out.

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Orta has been working from her base in Paris for over a decade, and the French context seems evident on many levels. Parisian innovation in theory and practice with regard to the city and its social/psychological condition has dominated European thought, from Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life" and Georges-Eugène Haussmann's boulevards, both of the late nineteenth century, to Guy Debord's Situationist movement of thirty years ago and Catherine David's explorations of new urbanism at *documenta X* in 1997. Even Orta's decision to make part of her practice a subversion of *haute couture* and *haute cuisine* seems, to British eyes at least, Franco-inflected to say the least. Writers on Orta have also identified connections between her work and that of politically motivated and collaborative art in the United States, citing Ukeles, Gran Fury, Group Material and Barbara Kruger, among others, as examples. Another might be the little-known Claude Simard, who in the early 1990s made *Bodysuits* from long Johns into which were sewn male genitalia and pubic and chest hair in an ironic play on male and female identity. Such concerns are evident in the work of numerous other artists, including Janine Antoni and Cindy Sherman. Although it is not unimportant that Lucy Orta is a female artist, her own concerns seem more humanistic and global than gender orientated.

In the UK early exponents of the social trajectory in art were active in the 1960s and 1970s, such as individual artists Stephen Willats and Conrad Atkinson and, more recently, Welfare State, a major community and cross-arts organization, and Art of Change (Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson), whose work—re-enfranchising communities particularly in the London Docklands area through collaborative public art projects—reveals some connections with Orta's work. Equally valid parallels might be seen in the work of younger artists active in the UK, with which Orta is largely unfamiliar. I am thinking of artists such as Alison Marchant, who interviews and collaborates with individuals from working-class communities, from which emerge audiovisual installations, or even less overtly political artists, such as Simon Starling, who painstakingly researches and reconstructs design objects using alternative materials from other objects. Collaborative work with nonartists in the production of art has also been a key methodology and approach by UK artists such as Gillian Wearing, Jacqueline Donachie and Anna Best, to name just three. It seems to be an open question whether the predominance of women working in this way is significant. Some critics have argued that the rejection (or at least partial erasure) of a single authorial creator in this genre of art arises through women's search

for alternative and more “horizontal” professional structures. Orta has not specifically articulated her practice in this way, but it is clear that she views the ability to communicate, enthuse and utilize the skills and energy of others in her many projects as absolutely essential. In addition to her own practical and artistic skills, it should not be forgotten that Orta herself has become adept at being a “connector,” a reflection-in-action of her aesthetic and political aims. In this she can clearly be positioned in a European and American context of art practice over the last thirty years or so.

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Behind much of this work, and of course Orta’s, too, is an ecological concern centering on waste: food and material waste clearly, but also humanitarian surplus and Western society’s seeming inability to cope with a whole range of things for which it cannot find immediate commercial need. The *Connector* project has been described by Orta as aspiring to be “a welcoming village of unlimited population,” and even in this short phrase we can discern the distance between her way of expressing artistic intentions and modern urban planning as it exists today. Unlimited population? Welcoming? These are rare characteristics in new developments in westernized cultures and, despite a growing interest in sustainable architecture and creating ecologically friendly building materials, these topics remain a minority concern. Truly habitable architecture is not yet the habit. Luckily it has increasingly become the job of artists to use their knowledge of and insight in areas adjacent to their own—such as architecture, where there has certainly been a dereliction of social duty over the last century—in order to provide new imaginative possibilities for our future.

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I started by invoking the term “relational aesthetics” as it has already been applied to Orta’s many projects. And the *Connector* village model of recent years can be seen as an important European artist’s contribution to a much wider field of debate around ecological concerns, how society works and how we might redefine the agents of change. In our complex world, this was never going to be about objectively determined systems. As contemporary anthropologist and critic Ulf Hannerz has written, “The view of society as a system is also at least qualified by a reawakening concern with agency, and furthermore writers on globalization and the world system argue that, with increasing interconnectedness of many kinds, nation-states become less and less satisfactory as units of analysis. [...] the habitat of an agent could be said to consist of a network of direct and indirect relationships, stretching out wherever they may, within or across national boundaries.”⁵ Orta’s village does not represent a mini nation-state, but a sequence of variable future possibilities, which, to some extent, the artist only partly governs. She sets up relationships on different levels and in her work we see organic, intrapersonal shapes appear, combine, re-form not unlike microscopic lives observed under a lens.

As many writers on Lucy Orta’s work have found, it is difficult to summarize. This is partly due to the wide range of work that she undertakes, and its complex fusion of aesthetic and political concerns. But I think one of the other reasons is that it makes itself available not only on very visceral and personal levels but also on more theoretical and poetic ones, too. When a *Connector* project, for example, is in progress at its developmental stage, it is a live event among relatively few people. It involves meeting, talking, designing, laughing, communicating and overcoming embarrassment. Thereafter it resurfaces as drawings, as websites and publications, as interpretative text. And of course it is also reconstituted back as a performance or public event, like an exhibition of artifactual work. Finally, each project connects itself to other projects in terms of material, intention and the processes initiated in order to bring it to life. To use George Simmel’s terms again, each is a bridge and a door to the other. And Orta’s work as a whole is a bridge and a door to the world.

1. Pierre Restany, ‘Social Engineering’, in Lucy Orta: Process of Transformation, Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1999, p.5
2. Suzi Gablik, Conversations at the End of Time, London: Thames & Hudson, 1995, p.442
3. George Simmel, “Bridge and Door”, in Rethinking Architecture. A Reader in Cultural Theory, London: Routledge, 1997, p.69

4. Anthony Storr, Solitude, London: Harper & Collins, 1997 (1988), p.xiv
5. Ulf Hannerz, Transnational Connections. Culture, people, places, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 48