

Title, Antarctica

Author, Bartolomeo Pietromarchi

“The continuing demographic explosion, technological acceleration, global warming, the hole in the ozone layer, the melting of the ice caps, rising ocean levels, the exploitation of the nonrenewable resources, deforestation, the accelerated loss of biodiversity, humanitarian disasters such as the shortages of drinking water in many places (made worse by the privatization of water resources), growing inequality, the dualization of society under the pressure of neo-liberal globalization, the growth of the fourth world, the uncontrollable growth of megacities in the poorest regions of the world, the emergence of the criminal economy and the rise of the organized crime, the impotence of the state, the disintegration of the welfare state, migrations, fundamentalism and xenophobia, terrorism, protracted wars—all these phenomena, and their feedback loops, are difficult to understand as anything other than a catastrophic scenario.”¹

For over eighteen years the work of Lucy and Jorge Orta has tirelessly investigated the global phenomena—migrations, humanitarian and environmental crises, urban decay—and reflected on some of the most urgent themes of the contemporary condition, from the end of traditional communities to new hypotheses of social cohesion, from immigration to sustainable development, ecology and intercultural dialogue. In a path marked by performances, group actions, production of objects, workshops, prototypes, publications and design projects, the Ortas have coherently interpreted a political conception of art that directly confronts social and humanitarian issues through strategies of critique and action, awareness and intervention, simultaneously implemented in both symbolic and real space. This attitude has been explicit since the first works done by Lucy Orta in urban space at the beginning of the 1990s, as in the case of the *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture* series, with which the artist called attention to the problem of the homeless and other socially active or outcast groups: organized in different world cities, the urban performances involved migrant workers in Johannesburg, homeless children and teenagers in France and Australia, dissident architecture groups in Venice and Berlin. The strategy of what was shortly to become the collaboration between Lucy and Jorge Orta, further reinforced by the founding of Studio Orta in Paris, was immediately clear: a type of art that aims at involving the subjects it addresses, that moves freely in public and private spaces, creating opportunities for encounter and social awareness, which at times can also be transformed into direct political action. This was the background for works like *70 x 7 The Meal*, dinners that involved thousands of people, opportunities to meet and discuss a theme of humanitarian urgency, or the workshops on the themes of the water crisis or organ donations (*The Gift*), or the performances on the war in Iraq (*Fallujah*).

For Lucy and Jorge Orta the symbolic dimension of artistic work always, in effect, takes on a concrete value: their works can often be directly utilized or attempt to involve the audience in collective actions. From the simplest objects to the most complex installations, in the perspective of the artists the works must all function as social catalysts, promoting and launching relational processes, devices of social, political and aesthetic activation. This is true of *OrtaWater* or *HortiRecycling*, for example, structures assembled with different materials (vehicles on which iron and glass structures are mounted), common objects transformed into technologically sophisticated devices capable of purifying water and making it potable, or of transforming food waste into something edible. Workshops are then developed around these projects. It is also true of *The Gift*, where the form of the human heart is repeated in hundreds of identical specimens of many different materials, in collaboration with artists, craftsmen or even school children; a work that aims at a true raising of social consciousness regarding organ donation.

In other words, this is an artistic practice that belongs to the sphere of “political aesthetics,” not

¹ L. De Cauter, *The Capsular Civilization. On the City in the Age of Fear*, Nai Publishers, Rotterdam 2004, p. 93

in the sense of a merely aesthetic approach to political topics and themes, a reduction or synthesis of important political issues in an attractive game of sensorial effects and formal conventions, but in the sense, to use the words of Jacques Rancière, of “a bordering of spaces and times, visible and invisible, discourses and voices, that simultaneously configure the place and the objectives of politics as one of the forms of experience.”² In this perspective art is seen as a *function* capable of changing the way we look at and interpret reality and, in the best of cases, of supplying alternative visions that inform the actions and opinions of those who are willing to establish a relationship with that art.

All the work of Lucy Orta, on her own, at first, and then in collaboration with Jorge, starts with a redefinition of the relationship of the body with its environment in the contemporary age. Starting with *Refuge Wear* and *Survival Kit*, all the way to *Body Architecture*, *Body Politics*, *Nexus Architecture* and *The Gift*, the relationship of the body with its physical and symbolic surroundings is the fulcrum of the interest of the artists. In this perspective, the work of the Ortas builds on Foucault’s reflections on biopolitics, and in particular on the passage, in the modern era, from an idea of human life as a totality that can only be preserved or destroyed (the “blood,” the right of life and death) to a conception in which life is managed and disciplined by political power through specific norms and with the collaboration of those scientific disciplines that contribute to form the concept of “normality.” Life itself, the “nude life” that for Foucault becomes the decisive territory of the exercise of biopower, in the era of global capitalism also represents a marketable good, whose control is concentrated in the hands of economic oligarchies that possess the necessary technological capacities (biotechnologies, genetic research, etc.)³ It is precisely this condition of the subject as a simultaneously biological and political body, with its most basic survival needs and social, political and economic implications, that becomes the focus of the works of Lucy and Jorge Orta. In *Refuge Wear* the body is protected by a technological wrapper that permits it to survive, but at the same time puts the accent on the figure of the “refugee” as a paradigm of the existential condition of contemporary man, exemplifying the notions of mobility and deterritorialization. In the series *OrtaWater* and *HortiRecycling* the reflection shifts toward basic resources that permit man to survive. Here again, the theme is the right to access to primary resources like water and food on the part of populations put at risk by the consequences of free market privatization and environmental crisis.

The body and its derivations, the prostheses that ensure its survival, therefore constitute the elements and themes of their political and social action, further underscored by the use of texts as an integral part of the work. On the overalls, tents, vehicles and any available surface, in fact, messages and slogans appear that put the accent on the fundamental rights of man, echoing the great struggles for human rights and access to vital resources.

Starting with biopolitical imagery, the artists’ thinking concentrates on a concept of the *environment* seen as a complex of biological, technological, economic and political questions whose confines and urgencies are constantly subject to conflict and revision. A reflection on an “ecology of existence” that transforms the very idea of environmental context. While in the recent artistic tradition so-called site-specific or environmental art considers places in their geographical, social and historical complexity, in the work of the Ortas place is seen above all for its biopolitical meaning, as everything that makes human life possible, in its concrete biological, technological, economic and political sense. Thus the possibility of making works “migrate” from context to context: the *Refuge Wear* appears in different cities around the world, the *Mobile Intervention Unit (M.I.U.)* vehicles can be transported and installed wherever required, the collective actions like *Nexus Architecture* and *70 x 7 The Meal* can be repeated in different contexts and sites, and adapted for the occasion. Their characteristics are flexibility, adaptability, modular design. In this perspective it seems clear that the Ortas’ way of producing works is based on a series of formal devices and conceptual strategies composed, broken down and reassembled depending on the specific context of intervention. All their work can be said to be limitlessly subject to reconfiguration, in effect. Thus in the series of habitation/tents of

² J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London 2004. Cit. in *Non-governmental Politics*, Zone Books, New York 2007, p. 329.

³ M. Foucault, *The Birth of Bio-Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, [city???](#) forthcoming (April 2008).

Collective dwelling, *Connector Mobile Village* and *Nexus Architecture*, both the “suits” and the tents are made in such a way as to be linked together in a single, modular environment of components. The autonomy of the single elements is preserved and underlined by the freedom of choice of taking part in a collective system. Again in this case, the work becomes a device capable of activating participation and reflection on new ways of living and relating: texts and slogans always appear on the tents, transforming them into communicative objects, vehicles of narration on political and social themes.

All this forms the background for the latest major project by Lucy and Jorge Orta, *Antarctica*, which returns to many of the recurring themes and solutions of their career. In the spring of 2007 the artists made an expedition to Antarctica,⁴ a real and symbolic voyage to the ends of the earth, in a region where the environmental conditions are extreme, even threatening to human survival. Once again the selected place—one of the most hostile on earth, where even the minimum requirements for survival are often impossible to organize—becomes an emblematic example of an environment that is becoming less and less hospitable for the entire human race. Antarctica is the place of the most vivid, continuous, unstoppable advance of the effects of global warming, the effect and cause of a new permanent state of emergency. But it is also symbolic, because the “sixth continent” is one of the very few places on earth not subjected to national jurisdiction, but fully protected by an international convention as an environmental and scientific reserve. A free, virgin territory, the last example of an environment not subjected to man’s exploitation, not available for private interests, extraterritorial: a state of geopolitical exception.

Antarctica is also the continent that conserves, in the form of ice, the greatest reservoir of fresh water in the world. The artists, in keeping with their *modus operandi*, have tested the premises of their work in the field. The *Antarctic Village* is an encampment of tents, each unit composed of flags of different nations, creating a sort of global village in a free, neutral territory. A temporary, mobile encampment, set up in collaboration with the scientific community that has studied and monitored the continent for about fifty years now. Together with this installation, the artists have made the *Antarctica World Passport*, a true passport prototype that offers symbolic access to all the countries of the world, and the Antarctica flag, again created by combining many different national flags. Beyond environmental issues, the artists put the accent on the free circulation of individuals across the whole planet, even proposing an amendment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to include the right to free circulation, on a par with merchandise, economic flows and pollution (Art. 13:3).

In an era of global emergency in which the prospects for sustainable coexistence between humankind and its natural environment seem to be threatened, Lucy and Jorge Orta send a message of awareness and hope. To grant visibility to the place in greatest danger due to climate change, while at the same time to raise consciousness of the fact that this emergency, for the first time, is a problem shared by all human beings, because it impacts them all, making no distinctions. And if, for the first time, as the climatologist Cynthia Rosenzweig⁵ has recently emphasized, the situation is objectively critical in the global sense, the crisis has at least one positive effect: the new ecological awareness or “biopolitical imagination” that is creating a shared, transnational, transcultural and apolitical movement, promoting dialogue and interchange among peoples to confront the first truly global social problem in the history of humankind.

⁴ The expedition was undertaken in the context of the *Biennial al Fin del Mundo*, Ushuaia City, Tierra del Fuego 2007. See texts by Mariano Memoli and Corinne Sacca Abadi at pag in this same publication.

⁵ Cynthia Rosenzweig, contribution at the seminar *Climate Change at the Crossroads*, Rome, 4-5 February 2008