## between art and action lucy orta



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Utopia is a word that, since its popularisation via Thomas Moore's famous 1516 tract of the same name, has been abused and misappropriated numerously. This holds true in the contemporary art world also where the concept of utopianism, though central to twentieth-century modernism, has since been largely discredited and maligned. Curiously, the notion of utopianism has recently come to the fore again, if not generally, then certainly within the domain of the by now, thoroughly globalised contemporary art scene. One reason for this is the nature of this wider globalised scene itself, a corporatised scene driven by the demands of trans-national business everywhere purveying the spread of "turbocapitalism". Thus, within the contemporary art world corresponding with this global situation, those artists aware but critical of corporate globalisation have turned evermore to exploring ways of addressing and circumventing its significant negative quotient.

Among such practitioners is the British, Paris-based artist Lucy Orta, exhibiting in the Adelaide International 2010: Apart, we are together for the Adelaide Festival. Orta's practice, alongside her contemporaries like Andrea Zittel, Atelier van Lieshout, the N55 collective and Thomas Hirschhorn to name but a few, is predicated overall on a utopian investigation and critique of the effects of corporate globalisation on the contemporary individual. Moreover, such a practice questions in particular, globalisation's dire effects on subjects unable to access the material and social privileges that globalisation, as a positivist discourse, invariably promises. The utoplanism evident in Orta's work, its desire to not only represent life but change it, is by no means naïve though. Neither is it nostalgic for romanticised images of earlier avant gardes. Utilising a range of inter-disciplinary means, Lucy Orta, in close collaboration with her husband Jorge, an Argentinean artist and activist,2 challenge through their collective multidisciplinary activities, globalisation's hegemonic assumptions. In doing so, they also indict globalisation's rampant tendency to isolate and discard those deemed unnecessary to its hyperbolic operations.

For Adelaide International: Apart, we are together Orta presents a continuation of her Nexus Architecture project (1993-2002), a series emblematic of her wider practice. For these public pieces, which combine architecture, performance and fashion, invited individuals come together to be physically joined by clothing specially designed by Orta, often in collaboration with the participants themselves. Some of these clothing items have also been designed remotely via the Internet by interested would-be participants. This process further extends the metaphoric implications of the term Nexus which means, "link or bond, (where) the symbolic content is more important than functional. The inter-connected system of channels, zippers and connecting elements (of Nexus Architecture) are direct embodiments of the idea of social link—a "social sculpture". 5

The social aspect of these works is eminently apparent with mass participants joined together either front to back in snaking queues or as a standing group interconnected in grid formation. The nature of these performances, like the clothing itself, which is reminiscent-albeit in a quasi sci-fi mode-of outdoor or adventure wear, is ambiguous. For instance, are such performances, given that they are often semi-obstructive interventions occurring in public places, actually protests, or are they just art? Such a question is even more pertinent considering some of the contexts in which Orta has produced Nexus Architecture. At the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in 1997 for example, Orta collaborated with migrant female labourers from the Usindiso women's hostel who co-designed their own costumes<sup>6</sup> and at the Biennale's opening, "formed a defiant chain linking the city and exhibition venues". 7 Similarly, in 2002 Orta organised Nexus Architecture x 110 Nexus Type Cholet, for a group of one hundred and ten children in Cholet, France. While undoubtedly playful, this piece was also an extension of another presented in 1998 in Lyon and designed to bring public attention to the "Global March Against Child Labour", a steady increase in child labour being one of globalisation's more archaic pseudo-Victorian manifestations.

With works such as these mind, it would seem that Orta's greater project was transparently linked, in a spirit of protest, to the idea, also prominent in today's global art world, of art as activism. Yet, Orta herself, not discounting her strong conviction in the social import of art, complicates this assumption,

The work we do is entirely an artistic endeavour based on a conception of how we envision contemporary art and its ability to communicate with all kinds of different audiences and intervene in all walks of life as a means to building a more equitable and sustainable world. We are picking up from where Beuys left, convinced that art has the power to transform not just the individual, but society at large and we are eager to try as many different artistic formats and strategies as possible.

The reference to Beuys and his "social sculpture" may seem odd taking into account the German artist's almost messianic self-fashioning. Indeed, such fashioning of the artist as righteous redeemer appears distinctly alien to the Orta enterprise which these days operates predominantly under the appellation Studio Orta, a collective that consists foremost of Lucy and Jorge Orta, but is additionally.

a virtual canopy under which many different people work, with different competences from artists, technicians, curators, administrators etc., who come and go depending on the scale and time frame of a project. We have a permanent staff to manage the day-to-day running of the different studios, conditioning of artworks and touring exhibitions. Our practice has grown and the work more voluminous so our physical spaces have enlarged too. We now occupy a studio in central Paris, The Dairy (2000) and Les Moulins (2007), which are both near Paris in a new cultural development we are instigating... We founded Studio Orta in 1991 so that we could work with and employ associates with a vision to create a large enterprise-like structure in the spirit of the Factory—it's difficult to ignore the Warholian legacy.





Studio Orta appears then not only to upset the traditionalist envisaging of the artist as solo-genius but perhaps more teilingly, appropriates too the language and structures of corporate globalisation. The corporatised ring to the name Studio Orta, at the same time, undermines through the collective's actual activities, the fundamental profit motif central to all contemporary corporations. In this way, it were as if Studio Orta had recognised the social implications of the term "corporation" meaning a collective entity, a corporate body whose individual members share the same outlook, concerns and ethical responsibility. This of course, is the antithesis of the notion of corporatisation we have become accustomed to, where ethics and individual identity are subsumed for the sake of the anonymous accumulation of wealth and its application as the predominant post-political expression of power and domination today.

Somewhat surprising though and equally as anomalous as Orta's previous reference to Joseph Beuys is her invocation of the Factory and the "Warholian legacy". For while the spectre of Warhol's venture might be difficult, nigh impossible, to escape in a contemporary cultural climate already way beyond mere capitalist saturation, the social and collective dimension of the Factory are leagues removed from those of Studio Orta, in the latter instance, the socialisation of production is incorporated into the very nature of the products, the artworks, performances and clothing themselves. In this manner, the collective modality is logically broadened in a multiplicity of ways to encompass public-art and nonart arenas. In the case of the former Warholian model, on the other hand, the social dimension functions as the atavisation of the cult of personality central to post-World War II USA (and global) culture. Whereas Warhol's social effort is "implosive" in a Baudrillardean sense-insofar as it coolly regards the Social as non-existent other than as a proliferation of mechanical representations and their endless repetition-Orta's is utopian in its belief that art-making must and should spread naturally into fields other than its own networks.

Further pursuing such socialist possibilities for art are Orta's events collectively titled 70x7 The Meal, "sculptures and wall works" which are also being exhibited at the Adelaide International. 70x7 The Meal was first instigated in 2000 and it is important to mention Jorge's crucial role in this series;

The relationships artist, artwork, production, diffusion and spectator—were central to Jorge's preoccupations, promoting the idea of artist as a mediator of a collective process, someone who could develop subjacent 'feasibility structures' to realise collective ideas and projects, and this is something we still practice today in works tike 70x7 The Meal. 11

For these works, which are explicitly collective and socialising in character, Orta would invite seventy members of a chosen location, a town or city, to invite seven other people to attend a dinner specially orchestrated by the artist and her Studio. In the process of realising numerous situations of this kind, Studio Orta would design and have manufactured, limited edition porcelain plates, one for each person attending. These plates are encrypted with images and words that emphasise sociability and interconnectedness and, of course, their intrinsic relationship to the communality of eating. In locations like instruck, Austria; Cologne, Germany; Antwerp, Belgium and Napa in the USA, the plates were editioned by no less auspicious a company than Royal Limoges in France. However,

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instead of using this fact to cheaply elevate the objects and the events to a level of petit-bourgeois fetishism. Orta often chose to give away the plates at the end of each meal to their users. In this way, these communal performances become part of a micro gift-economy where the gifts of food, company and precious objects were offered in exchange for the time and participation of those agreeing to take part.

Additionally emphasising the gift economy inherent to the 70x7 The Meal series is Orta's frequent use of discarded produce for its essential gastronomic component. Recently, Orta, like many, has recorded being appalled at the general extent of global food waste. Thus, the cycle 70x7 The Meal was also partially influenced by Orta's "dismay during French agricultural demonstrations (where) each year tons of fruit are dumped onto the highways to protest against imported goods". <sup>12</sup> By now, this is a well-documented phenomenon of global capitalism which prefers to destroy perfectly good food if it means a company can maintain its competitive edge. Indeed, such companies capitalise on consumer fear of rotten or contaminated food by making them believe that such destruction is necessary for "hygiene purposes".

Significantly, numerous others see the situation differently. Veteran French filmmaker Agnes Varda for example, in her alternatingly playfully autobiographical and excoriating documentary The Gleaners and I from 2000, (and therefore coinciding with the inception of 70x7 The Meal) documents this very same phenomenon. Yet, alongside her indictment of mass food waste, Varda simultaneously charts the tradition of gleaning in France that allows anyone to legally retrieve produce discarded after crop harvesting. Viewed in this light then, Orta's 70x7 The Meal events, as well as other of her works in a similar vein, most notably All in One Basket and Hortirecycling, 13 tap into such a tradition while simultaneously increasing local awareness of an endemic global problem. The use of such leftovers-which in small town contexts reference as well, longstanding regional traditions that seek to maximise a food's usability is however only one aspect of these orchestrated gatherings. Indeed, on some occasions local celebrity chefs have been invited either to cook meals from abandoned produce or to prepare dishes especially for them using local seasonal foods. Employing well known chef's acts as a supplementary means of publicly addressing the issue of global food shortages while again, celebrating the social importance of dining.

Naturally, 70x7 The Meal, as an important aspect of the Orta oeuvre, raises some fairly complex questions about readily held conceptions of the Social and of the social function of art. For example, it could be superficially deduced from these events that they automatically prefigured the Social as an intrinsically unified and unifying ideal. This, nonetheless, is not the case when one recognises that these situations are deliberately predicated on inviting people from very diverse backgrounds. 70x7 The Meal. Act III, Innsbruck for instance. included "musicians, actors, politicians, organic farmers, bureaucrats, business people, doctors, etc. "14 thus allowing "the possibility for new connections and dialogues between diverse segments of society that would not ordinarily meet". 13 Furthermore, the unexpectedness of encounters facilitated by these means, consciously takes into account possible friction and disagreement as much as it does the new friendships, affection or "perhaps even love" 16 that may arise from them. In fact, the utopian quality of 70x7 The Meal lies not only in its overt highlighting of communality but also precisely, in its transgressing the normatively isolating institutions that otherwise keep conflicting values and their bearers pigeon-holed and apart. To express the freedom to disagree, and in person, is as much a liberating experience as it to connect and bond.

Lastly, the other facet of Studio Orta's multitudinous projects appearing in the Adefaide international is the The Gift-Life Nexus. This cycle, consisting principally of objects, began in 1996. In the case of the specific artefacts to be presented in Adelaide, they have all been refashioned from work produced for "Fluid Architecture", a workshop instigated by Studio Orta in Melbourne in 2002. The types of objects that comprise The Gift-Life Nexus are most commonly sculpted and constructed heart-shaped forms that view the symbol of the heart, central to the history of art in the West and elsewhere, "as a symbol of the gift of generosity, life and empathy". <sup>17</sup> Moreover, Orta has stated that dealing with so loaded a symbol allowed for "an open-ended discussion on the meaning of "heart" religious, emotional, scientific, literal—with a huge diversity of communities". <sup>18</sup> However, a more personal side to this project underwrites its more semantic aspect. The Gift-Life Nexus first came about after.

a dear friend of ours died a senseless death on a waiting list for a heart transplant and this made us aware of the fact that there are thousands of deaths per year in France due to lack of organ donations—in a country that can afford solutions: (Therefore) we believed that the role of art in this sensitive subject area could be used to generate workshops, actions and exhibitions that could awaken a consciousness… we embarked on ten years of research leading to the production of artefacts, installations and performances under the heading Opera-tion Life Nexus. <sup>19</sup> with the collaboration of over forty cities around the world. <sup>20</sup>

The associated The Gift-Life Nexus works consequently invoke yet another gift economy, which ultimately imply questions of life and death. Actually, there could be no more potent a gift economy than that suggested by organ donation, which is in the most literal sense, usually a gift of life. Once more, the centrality of the motif of the gift economy is foregrounded in Orta's practice. Its dramatic proximity to considerations of life and death in The Gift-Life Nexus pieces are equally present-albeit more subtly-in the 70x7 The Meal performances; the gift of food also bestows life. Similarly, the gift of shelter implied through the Nexus Architecture project indicates related concerns for the fragility and vulnerability of life particularly as it is exposed to the challenges of a cut-throat post-industrial world. Perceived from a global perspective, the highly emotive and ethically complex matter of organ donation calls to mind also the massive illegal, 'heartless' and basically sinister, contemporary trans-national trade in body organs. The disturbing reach of such trade-that regularly involves bribery, coercion, kidnapping and murder-simply illustrates that in a globalised scenario overwhelmingly purveying the instrumentalism of Capital, life is cheap, even if its constituent components are extremely expensive. Overall, Orta aims to partially circumvent the instrumentalism of the global-capitalist ethos by proposing alternative methodologies and works that are open-ended, poetic, emotive and ambiguous.

By now, the utopian dimension of Orta's practice will be clearly apparent; its privileging of collectivity, co-operation, experimentation and gifting all testify to a utopian impulse. This impulse is certainly evident in the three related strands of works showing in Adelaide International. Similarly apparent, is the distinctly humanitarian aspect of the Studio Orta enterprise, a fact doubly emphasised by statements made by Lucy Orta herself; "Art-making is profoundly emotional, an expression of hope, a proposal for alternative living, it's a life project; it's a commitment with yourself as well as with society."<sup>21</sup>

Of course, such stressing of the utopian and humanitarian capabilities of art-making have until relatively recently been more or less ridiculed; the globally dominant model of contemporary artistic endeavour being largely whether 'ironically' or not-a quasi-corporate, individualistic business-geared one. What Studio Orta's multifaceted activity proves is that a utopian and humanitarian direction need not automatically signify theoretical backwardness or naïvety. In fact, one of Orta's more renowned supporters is the French theorist of time, speed, technology and art, Paul Virilio, a writer who could be accused of idealism, but certainly not of simple-mindedness. Like Virilio, Orta recognises the dystopian surfeit-social, economic and personal-that comes with contemporary globalisation. And while Orta does not believe that her art, or any art for that matter, could alter this situation holus-bolus, she is certainly convinced that art can change life on a micro-level. Micro-change affected by a commitment to collective action is made powerful when it is recognised as interconnecting with diversely distributed practices similarly inclined. Furthermore, commitment to change of any kind avoids the habitual cynicism associated with many facets of the global, hyper-capitalistic art industry, and consciously distances itself from this. In place of slavishly craving adulation within this network, Studio Orta utilises the art world's presentational structures as merely one avenue of possibility among

On a contrasting note, the importance of ambiguity to the output of Studio Orta saves it from misguided evangelical readings. The Nexus Architecture series could equally read 'negatively' as representations of an enforced or artificial connection. These works could also be read as theatrically enacting the kind of servitude commonly associated with the prison chain gang, despite the colourful, celebratory garments. Meanwhile, the term "nexus", used variously throughout Orta's production, could distantly conjure the distinctly nightmarish world of the "Nexus 6" Replicants or clones popularised by Ridley Scott's iconic 1982 film Blade Runner. The 'nexus" in this instance is a biogenetic one and therefore relevant as a potential reference for Orta's endeavour, because of the latter's strong emphasis on the innate relatedness of disparate and otherwise physically disconnected individuals and communities. Pursuing this contra-dialectic it could be remembered as well that personal connection, as well as the desire for it, instead of basically biological is actually, eminently contextual.

For instance, a writer like the outspoken Czech novelist Milan Kundera, would remind anyone that for those who grew up under Communist, or other types of forcibly communalising dictatorships, there could be nothing more liberating than the solitude of one's own time and thoughts. Could this not also be the case though in a post-Communist, neo-liberal era where sociability is regularly pre-packaged or dictated predominantly through an emphasis on the consuming experience and spaces of shopping? Facing the sheer ubiquity of such a pervasive contemporary focus is not dis-connection as legitimate and freeing a gesture as the pseudo-social celebration of capital's intervention at every level of subjective life? Ultimately though, as far as Lucy and Studio Orta's production is concerned, it is the challenging ambiguity separating belief from critique and action from fiction, that positively propels art in a fraught global context. Rather than hopelessly implosive and contradictory, it is the unavoidable tension or "agonism" engendered by such dialogue that the Orta project regards alternatively as vitally constructive; it is regenerative for art and for the future expansion of its possible social roles.

Notes

Moore's Utopia, as has often been misunderstood, was not the author's attempted representation of a 'perfect land' but a satirical and hypothetical vehicle by which to address current issues of European politics and questions of Statehood. After all 'utopia', derived from the Greek, literally means "no-place"

<sup>7</sup> "Firstly as Jorge and I work together it's important to mention his background as this has played a core role in the foundation our common practice, although new influences have evolved the form, our conception of art has remained pretty constant. In reaction to the oppressive dictatorial regime in Angentina between 1926 and 1963 Jorge's passion and engagement for art was an extension of the youth movement ideologies and his personal mentors and friends, were artists Edgardo Vigo and Graciella G. Marx in Argentina, Clemente Padin in Druguay and Dämaso Ogar in Venezuala. Mail Art was used to exchange their ideas and strategies across Latin America and elsewhere overseas and they believed in the statement: 'An art from the base upwards, without artists!'' Email interview with the author December 2009-January 2010.

<sup>3</sup> \*Nexus Architecture (1993-2002) is regarded as an emblem of my practice\*. Email interview, op cit.

<sup>4</sup> This aspect of the Nexus Architecture is entitled D-FORM. It "proposes a method for creeting Nexus suits that evolve through an analysis of our personal/emotional qualities and the body language of our postures. The challenge here is to preserve the collective integrity of the Nexus metaphor, yet allow each suit to manifest the uniqueness of each participant's personality. The project is online and anyone is tree to personalise, design and create a suit http://www.studic-orta.com/dform\_project". ibid.

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<sup>6</sup> "For the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale we began experimenting with personalising the suits and invited a group of migrant female labourers from a local sheltar to select preferred graphic designs from Dutch Wax prints and Zuliu Kangas, which produced some of the most spectacular pieces, each statched by the women themselves." Orta also mentions "the positive empowering results of the Johannesburg workshops, and the women's attachment to the symbolic meaning of their garments", bid.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eda, Lucy Orta, London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2002: 19

Email interview, op cit.

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<sup>13</sup> The All in One Basket (1997-) and Mortinecycling (1999-) projects generally involve the explicit gathering and recycling of discarded food at markets like Les Halles in Paris. Many of these foods would be turned into preserves exhibited and sold either at the markets themselves or at galleries. As part of these interrelated series, Orta would video the process and record interviews with people about their attitudes to food and shopping. See Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eds, Locy Orta 63-68.

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17 Email interview, op cit.

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<sup>19</sup> Some of these works revealingly betray a historical link to the early twentieth-century materialist theate experiments of the Bussian Constructivists. See in particular Orta's works, Nexus Architecture x 50 - Nexus Type Operazion VV and Modular Architecture x 10, 1996. Robert Pints, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eds. Jucy Orts 126 and 129-129 (respectively).

20 Email interview, op cit.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourniaud, Maia Damianovic eds, Lucy Ortx 13.

<sup>22</sup> "Agenium" is a term championed by French theorist Chantal Mouffe to express the necessity of maintaining tension in democratic political process. This avoids the compremises of a collapse into a false and begrudging consensus. Agenism also acknowledges the centrality of difference in all communication and champions disagreement as both a necessary and vitally constructive force in genuinely democratic society and politics. See Chantal Mouffe. The Democratic Paradox, London, New York: Verse, 2000.

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