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 Lucy + Jorge Orta, *Fallujah – Peace Intervention*, 25 May 2004, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2004–07, original Lambda colour photograph backed on Dibon, edition of 15, courtesy the artists. Photograph Jason Evans. © 2010 Lucy + Jorge Orta.

## Lucy Orta: The artist as enabler

Nikos Papastergiadis

A trained fashion designer and an instigator of the first Masters program to promote socially motivated design, British-born Lucy Orta has worked predominantly in the contemporary art sphere for the last two decades. Along with her solo practice, since 1991 she has engaged in collaborative artistic work with her Argentine-born husband, Jorge Orta. Together they employ a range of techniques from sculpture to light projection, as well as staging ephemeral interventions, performances and workshops focusing on socially engaged and engaging concepts. On the eve of participating in the Adelaide Festival's visual arts program, 'Adelaide International 2010: Apart, we are together', Lucy Orta spoke with Nikos Papastergiadis about creative chain reactions and changing the world one meal at a time.

**Nikos Papastergiadis:** You began your career in fashion; what made you cross over into the visual arts?

**Lucy Orta:** I studied fashion–textile design at Nottingham Trent University and I worked as a successful designer for various brands in Paris for around ten years, but this 'fast' industry career was separate yet parallel to my development as an artist, which took place gradually after meeting and working closely with Jorge. Frustrated by the lack of a social or political agenda within the fashion world I joined Jorge's collective in his Bastille studio. As well as Jorge's socially motivated processes and outcomes, I was interested in the pedagogic dimension of his artistic practice. This played an important role in my early intellectual and artistic development.

The first sculptures I realised, the 'Refuge Wear' series, were conceived as temporary mobile shelters and took the form of tents, bivouacs and sleeping bags – a cross between conceptual and semi-functioning habitats for nomadic situations. My knowledge as a designer led me to explore the new characteristics of fabric

membranes and the revolutionary developments that had taken place in synthetic fibres and textile manufacturing. This opened up an infinite field of material research, far more advanced than in the commercial fashion industry. I was interested in the 'intelligent' textiles revolution, which allowed a more conceptual approach to fashion design and a dialogue about a new socio-communicative role of clothing.

**NP:** What is the difference between the aesthetic possibilities?

**LO:** I don't think we should look at difference through aesthetics. We can talk about the differences of approach to the conception of an idea, whereby a fashion designer takes into account the emancipation of the body and the changing identity, the history of dress, the evolution of textiles and materials, the development of the cut, the method of construction, and so on. A fashion artefact will evolve out of this embedded knowledge and the wish to innovate.

So we could say the artistic approach follows the same plane and evolves out of the desire to push the boundaries of previous artistic impulses. However, in the visual arts we do not have clients to please so we are free to question injustices in our society without having to worry about whether our political actions might have a negative effect on a company's share value. Our forms are non-restrictive, so this allows latitude for expression: performance, sculpture, installation, video, and so on.

One example of our overtly political works is *Fallujah*, 2004–07, which took the form of a protest against the war in Iraq. It included a silent performance by fifty volunteers wearing striking combat suits at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. We stood standing for several hours throughout the museum galleries in collective meditation for the victims and offering a prayer for the future of the citizens. This travelled to the streets of Prague a couple of years later as a second attempt to bring about a public consciousness.



**NP:** Your practice pays particular attention to the relationships people form in the experience of events, such as meals or the joint construction of connective bodysuits and sculptures. How do you go about preparing the form of these encounters?

**LO:** It has always been our desire to bring the public closer to the artistic experience; without the shared experience the work is meaningless. The public are not passive recipients and, especially now that our sensorial experiences are adapting to the impact and accessibility of mobile media, we feel an increasing need to engage audiences differently around meaningful debate.

In the '70 x 7 The Meal' rituals we invite a small number of guests to become part of a meal and, in turn, implicate them to invite other people – so the act of creating the event happens through the chain reaction of human interaction. We are merely triggers, or enablers, in that process. The artwork attempts to become invisible, taking the form of the most cherished of our rituals; it mimics the essential human needs to eat and to unite. Only small signals, like the hand-printed tablecloth or the Limoges porcelain plates, leave a trace that something unusual has brought these guests together. But these clues should remain discreet so as not to incite the 'fear of art' and allow the catalyst encounters to blossom naturally. Nobody can change the world with a meal, but each meal changes the world.

**NP:** The symbol for the 2010 Adelaide Festival is the human heart. Can you elaborate on your use of this symbol and its connection with both the body and the community?

**LO:** Jorge began working with the symbol of the heart in 1996 for the simple reason that a dear friend of ours died a senseless death on a waiting list for a heart transplant. It made us aware of the fact that there are thousands of deaths each year due to the lack of organ donations. Within this sensitive subject area, art could generate workshops, actions and exhibitions that could, in turn, awaken a

public consciousness. We embarked on fifteen years of research leading to the production of artefacts, installations and performances under the heading 'OPERA.tion Life Nexus', with the collaboration of over forty cities globally. Our focus became the heart, as a symbol of the gift of generosity, life and empathy. It allowed an open-ended discussion on the meaning of 'heart' – religious, emotional, scientific, literal – with a huge diversity of communities.

As our methods of communication had proved successful over the years, we were contacted by the national donor-transplant organisation of France to create the inaugural event for the 2003 World Transplant Games in Nancy. As well as creating a light work for the UNESCO heritage site of Place Stanislas, we embarked on the largest of our workshops, engaging over 35,000 high school students across the region in the creation of a charter for organ donation called 'The Gift'. The charter can now be found enclosed in a gold plated heart on the tip of a public sculpture we created for the city of Nancy, and awareness created by the project led to the issue being adopted as a public agenda item.

**NP:** Does collaborative practice mean the death of the artist?

**LO:** Certainly not. Just because a lot of people are doing creative things together doesn't necessarily mean that an artwork is the outcome. Artists are trained to offer critical thought and they are experts in teasing out strong ideas from a multitude of irrelevant ones. What collaborative practice means is that common ideas are shared and discussed openly, but we still need the artist for them to be manifested.

Adelaide International 2010: Lucy + Jorge Orta, Jam Factory, Adelaide, 26 February – 31 March 2010.