Title, The Super Modern Wardrobe

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Interview with Lucy ORTA, September 2000 – May 2001
conducted by Andrew Bolton, associate curator at the department of costume of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

> *I cannot talk about the body or the human condition without considering issues of identity, personal space and the environment. I consciously blur the fields of art, architecture and fashion to pave the way for new alternatives.*

Lucy Orta (1966) is a British-born artist who has been running 'Studio Orta' in Paris since 1991. Trained as a knitwear designer at Nottingham Trent University, her work "incorporates elements gleaned from the fashion industry which, when combined, create a 'symbolic clothing' that turns the power of the image back upon itself through a series of personal interventions and performances."[i] Working with a wide range of people, she shows her work in a variety of different spaces, although, as she points out, her work "takes on its true meaning in transitional spaces, communicating, questioning and interacting with a public."

Orta's work deals with issues of poverty, exclusion, dislocation and homelessness in contemporary urban life. Her first body of work, *Refuge Wear* (1992), was produced as a response to the Gulf War. As seen in chapter four, it included a range of multi-functional prototype clothes that transformed according to the individual's immediate needs. She continued this work with *Survival Kits* (1993), bags and pockets that contained diverse domestic objects and reliquaries, texts and photographic documents. *Nexus Architecture* (1994), enabled Orta to create new forms of exchange and realise the 'Collective Wear' prototypes, which house up to sixteen people under one shelter. With *Nexus Architecture*, she worked with the notion of the 'Social Link' ('Nexus') in the form of a metaphorical umbilical cord. Orta developed this idea with *Modular Architecture* (1996), a series of 'sensorial refuges' designed to encourage social bonds and communal living. Her *All in One Basket* (1997), grew from her shock at witnessing "so much food being thrown away by markets on a daily basis." She devised initiatives whereby discarded food was collected, sorted and made into preserves by leading chefs. Samples were then given away in markets. The latest stage in Orta's evolving work is *OPÉRA.tion Life Nexus* (2000), "a transversal composition evolving out of contemporary art with scientific and social implications."[ii] Music, dance, video projections and installations form the basis of this internationally collaborative project.

Although the context and language of Orta's work is primarily that of fine art, her 'symbolic clothing' or 'social sculpture' tackles many of the themes included in *The Supermodern Wardrobe*, particularly those of mobility, shelter, protection and identity. Indeed, her work has had a direct influence on many of the designers included in this book. An installation of her *Refuge Wear* at Première Vision in 1996, was instrumental in inspiring the high tech, multi-functional, gender-transcendent clothing of much supermodern fashion.

Why did you decide to use clothing as your primary medium of expression? Could you explain its role in your early work, particularly *Refuge Wear* and *Identity + Refuge*?
I am interested in the different layers that surround the body. Clothes act as an intermediary layer between the individual and society. *Refuge Wear* acts as a protective layer between the clothed body and the wider environment. The pieces are not based on traditional clothing forms (**Plates 4.17-4.19**). They convert according to need and necessity – an expression of one's individual role in society. *Identity + Refuge* developed around more traditional clothing, but nevertheless was concerned with expressions of identity. The assurance and recognition of one's personal identity was symbolised by the transformation of old clothes into new forms (**Plate A.1**).

Some of your public interventions might be seen as a critique of fashion. How do your clothes relate to the fashion system?

In the early nineties, I was completely disillusioned with fashion and its blatant consumerism. As a result, I installed *Refuge Wear* under the Louvre Pyramid during Paris Fashion Week (**Plate A.2**). I chose the Vivienne Westwood show, not only because she is a true innovator, but also because she was connected to the experimental art scene of the seventies. Since then, a new generation of designers has emerged and I now enjoy working within the fashion system. I try to question fashion, to go beyond fashion – not its functional aspects but its social and poetical aspects. For example, I worked with the magazine *Dazed and Confused*, which, to quote Mark Sanders aimed 'to turn the notion of style culture upon its head, releasing a set of suppressed social links within an arena of blatant visual consumerism.' Similarly, in the 'G'ym' collection, I created a series of portable message boards comprised of interchangeable outfits inscribed with graphic texts and quotes from philosophers. I imagined that each wearer could construct an ensemble to convey his/her opinions. Herman Linke photographed the clothes on people he met in cities around the world to further the idea of a global communications network.

Could you talk about your interest in textile developments and your use of technologically advanced fabrics.
After graduating from Nottingham Trent University in 1989, I chose to work in fashion forecasting, as I was particularly sensitive to economic and social change. The transition from designer to artist occurred over a period of time and was linked to my interest in textile technology, innovative fibre development and the social, political and economic climate of the late eighties and early nineties. I became a founding member of Casa Moda in Paris, a group of designers and artists who were interested in creating links with textile research and experimental design. This formed the foundations for the first textile-based *Refuge Wear* prototypes that followed.

I am particularly interested in fabrics with 'multi-technical' properties and I look for a correlation between the technical specificity of the fabric and the poetics of the final object. I prefer using aluminium fabrics, not only because they reflect heat but also because they create a mirror that reflects the environment, enabling us to merge more intimately with our surroundings (**Plate 4.20 a-b**). Exploring the unique properties of technological textiles is extremely important in my work.

Can you explain this relationship in more detail?
I take into account the 'subject' of the piece and the various transformation possibilities of the fabrics. Materials that have a microporous membrane coating are particularly interesting as they attempt to mimic certain characteristics of the skin, such as the transfer of body humidity from the interior to the exterior. This micro-process is fundamental to our wellbeing and, even though the viewer may be unaware, it is part of the poetry of the object. A 'Mobile Survival Sac' may have a combination of microporous ripstop with a PU-coated polyamide, which takes into account abrasions during movement as well as the need for body comfort (**Plate 4.17**). Photo-luminescent weaves and Kevlar® provide a barrier membrane that act as warning signals. Aluminium surfaces can be placed on the outside to reflect the sun's rays and/or on the inside to reflect the body's heat. It is the idea that our body is in complete interaction with the surrounding environment, that we determine the harmony within our habitat that I find particularly interesting. Thermochromic-coated fabrics used for the 'Cocoon with Detachable Baby Carrier' change colour with temperature fluctuations enabling the mother 'unit' to react and control climatic variations. For the 'Mobile Cocoon' I was fascinated by developments in fleece undertaken by Rhone Poulenc, which retained five times more heat than wool (**Plate A.3**).

How closely do you work with fabric manufacturers?
I work at the concept and experimental stages with fabric manufacturers in Switzerland and Italy. I participate in think tank groups with philosophers, scientists, environmentalists and fibre technologists to co-ordinate new theory with practical applications.

How does your studio operate, who produces your work?
Studio Orta is made up of a small 'collective' based in the Bercy area of Paris. It is a 'spiral' enterprise, and at its centre is a regular team of 'contributors'. Depending on the timing and complexity of a project, the spiral may expand or contract. The Studio co-ordinates the manufacture of the pieces with subcontractors, architects and artisans. We hand-finish, pack and store all the work in a converted dairy, La Laiterie, 50 kilometres from Paris. Currently, we are running two non-profit organisations to manage larger-scale productions such as the *OPERA.tion Life Nexus*, a mixed-media project that involves performing arts, choreographers, composers and musicians.

You also organise community projects. How do the participants become involved?

Whenever and wherever possible, I try to create a strong bond with communities. *Nexus Architecture* has been important in establishing links. The first intervention was in a housing estate, La Noue, East of Paris. With this project, I organised a public performance in the estate in an attempt to establish a dialogue between the inhabitants. For the Second Johannesburg Biennale, I was able to involve migrant women labourers from a local shelter in the making of *Nexus Architecture* (**Plate A.4**). Each woman learnt how to cut, sew and finish a suit. At the end of the workshop, they were completely autonomous. They took the pattern away – complete with the 'Social Link' – to make the suits which they sold at local markets.

'Connector' is a more recent body of work that is 'co-created' with different participants in an attempt to form a vital link between people, commerce and the city. The most recent 'Connector' sector was produced with street vendors, street artisans and prostitutes in the heart of Mexico City. The final result took the form of human-scale guardian angels, hand painted in the traditional *ex voto* style that were completely unique.

Your pieces are unique, have you thought about producing your designs commercially?
Refuge Wear pieces are original, but they are also prototypes. After I exhibited the 'Habitent' in 1993, I was approached by two manufacturers to commercialise the design (**Plate 4.20a-b**). I pursued the industrial prototyping for several years, hoping that we could develop a fully functional 'aid kit' in keeping with the original concept. The final industrial prototype bore a physical resemblance to the original, but no longer manifested its poetical side (**Plate A.5**). The integrated front and back armature pockets and the objects were eliminated, which meant that the wearer would need surplus accessories, rendering him less mobile and more vulnerable. I took the decision at this point to dedicate my energies to 'initiatives' and 'pilot projects'. However, the industrial 'Habitent' prototype will be donated to an aid organisation when necessary.

Street Range was a prototype for a multipurpose shopping bag that I presented to TATI, the Parisian discount department store (**Plate A.6**). They already sold the typical cellophane plaid bags that have become the symbol of street vendors and shoppers in the 19th district in Paris and the transport bag for North African immigrants at CDG airport. I imagined that it could be replaced by a transformable 'trolley-come-shopping bag-come briefcase' – a pluri-functional bag that would be even more readily available – 'art for all'.

In 1996 I was invited by Première Vision, the international fabric trade fair, to create an exhibit for their new 'trend forum', designed to highlight developments in textile technology. I was responsible for the selection of innovative textiles and made a fifteen metre arrow-shaped catwalk for a series of *Refuge Wear* pieces. This exhibition was instrumental in inspiring the 'high tech' fabric trends and 'transformable' clothing that emerged in the following seasons.

I have not commercialised any pieces, but the fact that designers are showing coats that convert into sleeping bags, wearable back packs and that C.P. Company produced a 'Habitent' (**Plate 4.15 a-e)**, is evidence that my art is filtering into the fashion system. However, I was shocked that the Design section of the Georges Pomidou Centre in Paris exhibited the piece as 'innovation' in 1999, particularly since my 'Habitent' dates back to 1992. I find it surprising that brands like C.P. Company do not approach me, especially since I am extremely open to collaboration. In fact, it is part of the driving force behind my work. It is important that manufacturers working with designers on an experimental basis encourage innovation and push forward product design. However, the practice of not crediting sources of inspiration, common-place in fashion, merits debate.

In your recent work you have created what you call 'network spatial forms'. How have developments in technology affected how we think about space?
The information era is a portable one, and this portability is incompatible with traditional notions of territory. Relationships no longer gravitate around a common space but within a virtual arena – the idea that territory is now global. However, rapid communication and mobility represents only 14% of the population. It does not account for the flux and abandoning of territory of large sectors of the world population. The 'Connector' sculpture is one of the ways I attempt to represent this phenomenon. Rural communities are going through an identity crisis, and we are experiencing the need for more defined cultural or community bonds. For the last four years I have been working with the concept of 'ritual meals', intended for networking. An example is '70 x 7: The Meal', which involved an unlimited amount of guests invited to dine together. During '70 x 7: Act IV', the entire population of the rural town of Dieuze participated in an open-air-picnic. The fact that more than 1,500 people came to the 300 metre table set up in the high street is an example of a shift from rural isolation to collective territory.

How do your clothes facilitate movement, both within the garment and within space and society?
Refuge Wear forms a minimum space around the body. This space is essential to the development of the person inside. Some pieces have arm or hood appendages that assist the inhabitant in developing relationships outside his/her environment. In the case of *Nexus Architecture*, the 'Nexus' or 'Social Link' establishes a direct link with another person. All *Refuge Wear* pieces are transformable; they can separate to create two parts – a jacket and transport bag – or they have zipper systems that create mobile forms – from a sleeping bag to trousers. The supporting aluminium structures are lightweight and telescopic so that the architecture can effectively 'pop up'. The transformation from shelter to clothing is fundamental to the notions of freedom of movement and freedom of choice, and the creation of new relationships and new cultural exchange – 'Homo Mobilis'.

How does *Refuge Wear* function? What role do the pocket accessories, hoods and gloves play in your work? What do the texts mean?
Refuge Wear raises issues about the human condition. Although I make each piece with diverse situations in mind, they are all designed as temporary refuges for the body, spaces that provide physical and psychological shelter, a private regeneration space. As well as protecting and increasing one's chances of survival in adverse environmental, political and social conditions, they allow more intimate contact with our natural surroundings. The arm and leg appendages that protrude from the cocoon-like structures enable the body to function in an environment and manipulate space. They also provide vital mobility, allowing individuals to move and mutate to a new place or condition. *Refuge Wear* is a generic term; the sub titles include 'Habit Bivouac', 'Osmosis with Nature', 'Mobile Cocoon', 'Ambulatory Survival Sac' (**Plate A.7**) and 'Double Survival Sac' (**Plate 4.18**). Some *Refuge Wear* pieces are created with a particular situation in mind. For example, the 'Survival Sac with Water Reserve' (**Plate A.8**) and the 'Survival Sac with Detachable Baby Carrier', were both made during the Rwanda Crisis.

Refuge Wear pieces are often covered with pouches that contain both metaphorical and functional objects. These pockets are containers for personal belongings and represent an extension of identity. When I was working with the residents of the Salvation Army, we discussed the necessity for portable containers and the types of objects and utensils needed for living on the streets. With this in mind, I started to create *Survival Kits* for different hypothetical states – 'Change of Clothes Kit', 'Meal Kit', 'Interview Kit', 'On Board' (**Plate A.9**). I expanded my reflections to include documentary photographs of places I had visited. I also developed kits for real situations/places, such as a 'Building Kit' for the slums of Lima in Peru. These kits became statements of the human plight and responded to 'self help'.

The texts, symbols and images printed onto the objects are statements of identity, desire and intent. They are 'signs' that form a compendium of visual signifiers. On one of the Venice Biennale *Nexus Architecture* pieces is an important message: "Me, I've got a lot to say", a comment that I recorded from a participant in my first shelter workshop.

Many of your interventions take place in transitional spaces. What do these spaces mean to you? Do you feel that some transitional spaces have more potency than others, for instance, refugee camps?
Refuge Wear interventions take place in spaces that are void of human interaction yet possess the potential for interaction, such as railway stations. These spaces are often used as hangouts for the homeless; they are spaces that discourage both permanence and dialogue. By showing *Refuge Wear* in these spaces, I isolate people behind the confines of a 'refuge', giving them protection from the general masses while at the same time rendering their position visible. My interventions are an illustration of this absurd contradiction. I try to 'remedy' this situation with *Nexus Architecture*, which quite literally creates a social link and establishes an environment for interaction.

For personal research and documentation purposes I have spent time and organised workshops in various shantytowns and shelters for women, children and adolescents. Although I collected a lot of information during the Rwanda crisis and made several pieces during that period, I have not visited any Refugee Camps. I am sure that my work would evolve as a result. Open-air markets are interesting spaces because social interaction and transience are fused in a unique way. The project *All in One Basket*, documents the arrival and disappearance of clients, vendors and 'gleaners'. Each play a different role within the space and the passage of time.

You show your work in museums and galleries as well as transitional spaces. Does this change the meaning of the work?
I receive more and more invitations to show in museums and galleries, but I continue to show in diverse spaces ranging from the Salvation Army and primary schools to trade fairs and high profile contemporary art museums. My work takes on its true meaning in transitional spaces, communicating, questioning and interacting with a public. Comments such as 'It's a tent with feet' and 'A symbol of solidarity' draw in people. At the beginning, I separated my extra-murus work from my installations in galleries. Although I was aware of the difference between the living experience and its frozen institutionalisation, I expected that the people who visited a museum or gallery would be able to reconstruct the original context. However, my approach has changed. I try to link my work in communities with museums or galleries, to include them in the larger process. What is now shown in museums or galleries are examples of 'live' and constantly evolving work. And, of course, the exhibitions allow me to share my work with new audiences.

Recently, I have moved away from using transitional spaces for interventions. They have now become the subject matter of recent sculptures such as 'Life Nexus Village Fête' or 'Connector'. These expanding architectures with open-ended networks and complex infrastructures, represent a utopian way of investing space and creating new community formations.

Do you see a difference between the functions of shelter and protection?
Yes, shelter involves the notion of space around the person, space which enables the body and spirit to regenerate. Protection is more physical and suggests that the body can be aggressed by external forces. *Refuge Wear* pieces are not based on traditional clothing forms. Their 'volume' is created by a structure that raises the membrane above the chest in an attempt to reduce the sensation of claustrophobia, thereby providing a sense of well-being. I have been researching and working with tent engineers for several years to perfect an ideal body volume.

How do the concepts of individual and collective identity differ between *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture*? How did you approach the concept of identity in the *Identity + Refuge project*?
Refuge Wear is concerned with individual needs. I designed the pieces during the early nineties, a time of social, political and economic crisis. They question individual identity and how it is related to the surrounding environment. Each piece can be adapted to need and necessity and the pockets, glove and hood appendages are an extension of identity.

By 1994, I had begun to question concepts of community and the collective body. I was interested in establishing new relationships, hence titles such as 'Collective Wear' and *Nexus Architecture*. At this time, I met Paul Virilio, which was crucial to developments in my work. He was concerned with the breaking down of the family unit and the reconstruction of the social link. His philosophy and social criticism encouraged me to explore interconnections and new ways of creating dialogue. 'Collective Wear' are free-standing habitats with multi-appendages that evoke the problems of communication, but disallow mobility (**Plate A.10**). *Nexus Architecture* encourages participation and collective activity. The basic form of *Nexus Architecture* is a worker's overall. This form suggests uniform/uniformity and membership of a group. It provides a shelter against individualism and reinforces the strength of the collective. To form part of a group is to feel empowered. My favourite comment from a member of the public was in Mexico City – 'Los gringos tienen miedo' ('The Gringos are too afraid to walk alone'). We were able to create a 'pack' of solidarity in a city of extreme contrasts.

Identity + Refuge explores loss of identity and the problems in its reconstruction. In this project, second-hand clothes represent the rejection of an old identity and the facilities that are available to chose another in a consumer society. This creates a bleak contrast to the residents I worked with at the Salvation arm, who are given the unwanted garments. They have such difficulty defining their identity within this consumer society.

Could you talk about the notions of visibility and invisibility in your work?
The urban landscape and peripheral spaces are used as backdrops for *Refuge Wear* interventions. In Montparnasse station in Paris, the vibrant colours of the pieces rendered the wearer extremely visible and vulnerable to the public eye. The same piece in a squat merged into the environment, retreating into invisibility (**Plate A.11**). Oscillating between these different backdrops challenges the notions of social disappearance – 'Out of sight, out of mind'. The colours and forms, such as their hooded appearance, are not designed to render the wearer anonymous. Unlike the hoods worn by certain gangs and tribes, they act

as a point of communication, an 'inter-phone' into personal space, symbolised by prominent ear mufflers – metaphors for the invisibility of suffering, sadness or solitude.

What are your ambitions for your work in the future ?
I wish to be present in the social arena as a catalyst between utopia and reality – I call this 'Instigator Sculpture'. In front of the civic buildings in Trieste during the G8 environment summit, I installed two 'Vehiconnectors'. These pieces were the first in a new series of mobile survival units – military ambulances transformed for civilian use. I am currently sketching up ideas for a 'Glean Mobile' for the collection and distribution of surplus food products in agricultural regions. I have prototypes for architectural units that become permanent shelters and I am hoping to assist non-governmental aid organisations.

In the fashion industry, I hope to propose new business models and ethical codes in manufacturing based on the *Identity + Refuge* projects. Multinationals will continue to dominate marketing and distribution, but there is a place for alternative design. Rem Koolhaus and Herzog de Meuron are the first to explore this theory in the luxury market and I believe that this is paving the way for a new future of consumer awareness which takes into consideration alternative modes of consumption, fabrication and distribution to respond to new ethical sensibilities.

We are looking to expand Studio Orta to form an interdisciplinary team on a much larger scale, to remain totally open to transversal collaborations and be effective in all these different areas. We are in pursuit of creativity, which has the capacity to stir the conscience and eventually transform social and cultural misconceptions and inequalities. All the questions asked are part of a process of manifesting this new art form as a 'Functional Utopia'.

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[i] Sanders, Mark. *Blueprint*, No.150, May 1998, p.34.
[ii] OPÉRA.tion Life Nexus publicity material.