



Title, Refuge Wear

Author, Kodwo Eshun

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Once seen, never forgotten: Paris-based artist/inventor Lucy Orta's Habitent collapses the distinctions between fashion, architecture and taste to startling effect. Initially it's a ground-length silver poncho/kagoule made of aluminium-coated polyamide. Unfold the Habitent and it dramatically inflates into a zipped aluminium tent-like structure that fits four people. With its striped polar-fleece hood sitting on top and floppy sleeves for four arms and legs protruding from the form, it's a tent that you wear, that creates an immediate effect of refugees sheltering from extreme conditions.

Since 1991, all Orta's designs such as the Survival Sac, her Mobile Cocoon and the Modular Collective Cabin have bemused the buyers. Press at Paris Fashion Week were confronted by homeless people huddling inside the silver futuristic Habitents, their morphology swathed and realigned by its contours, redefining clothing as protective shelter units for the enforced nomadism of the homeless. Instead of the shabby, dingy clothes they normally wear, Orta's drastic de-familiarisation abruptly forces the homeless into a desirable future: you can easily imagine salaried types posing as street people just to try and get into one of her prototype designs.

The informative and well-designed catalogue **Refuge Wear** (Editions Jean Michel Place) brings together her preliminary sketches, photographs from her 1992 collection Refuge Wear, the 1993 Survival Kits collection and 1996's Modular Architecture along with four essays on her work including one by urbanist-theorist Paul Virilio. Orta is inventing new kinds of mobile clothing and temporary shelters for the high stress environments the homeless person is obliged to negotiate and survive. Her inventions update the Suitaloon and the Cushicle, the inflatable environments designed by Michael Webb of Archigram back in the '60s. But where the Suitaloon implied leisure, choice and adaptability, Orta's corporeal architecture confronts you with the extreme social insecurity of the late '90s. Not only do her designs shelter the body; they reorganise your shape until the homeless gain a public privacy, a private space by disappearing into the non-aligned formats she invents. At the 1995 Venice Biennale, Orta presented group actions in which 16 people were umbilically connected to each other by waterproof microporous polyester yellow boiler suits with tube. Each suit had silkscreen-printed headlines, newspaper reports, graphs and symbols on the state of homelessness. Another action involved eight people in a Collective Wear suit walking through the Paris streets. Updating Joseph Beuys' idea of social sculpture into events like this, Orta's project generates new social links, training perception on the spatial organisation of society. KE