



**LUCY
+ JORGE
ORTA**

**FOOD
WATER
LIFE**

Princeton Architectural Press · New York



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Introduction

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Cutting across art, performance, architecture, and design, the arresting work of Lucy + Jorge Orta deals with fundamental human needs. Issues such as water, food, shelter, and mobility underscore their practice, rendered in their drawings, sculptures, performances, large-scale installations, as well as in the workshops and conferences they have become known for. Rather than stand-alone projects, their works are often developed in series over a number of years, with various acts that build on one another, reinforcing their mission. Since creating Studio Orta in 1992, based in Paris, their work has increasingly grown in ambition and scale while retaining a core mission to investigate, challenge, and stimulate dialogue and exchange about social and cultural issues that are rooted in and have come to define contemporary life. "Our goal is to help change peoples' attitudes and habits, activate debate...and even change current legislation," they assert of their fearless approach.

Trained as a fashion designer, Lucy began her career as an artist in the beginning of the 1990s, with the specific mandate to create works that "respond to a critical and constructive gaze on the most sensitive areas of society." Her ideas were pointedly illustrated in early works such as *Refuge Wear*, created between 1992 and 1998, and *Body Architecture*, created from 1994 to 1998, for which she generated a series of tent-like structures with multiple functions. Drawing on her garment-construction skills, the works could be transformed from overcoats to backpacks to sleeping bags and tents. *Nexus Architecture*, developed between 1994 and 2002, also incorporated wearable structures, in this case bodysuits with attached umbilical cords that connected groups of people together in grid-like formations, as a metaphor for social connectivity. Worn by performers in a series of public interventions staged by Lucy in cities across Europe as well as in Havana, Cuba, they came to signal her increased interest in developing projects that interrogate the urban frame, opening up sites of public space for dialogue and exchange and promoting social cohesion by reasserting the collective over individual action.

For Jorge Orta, the urban and rural landscapes have proven fertile grounds for many of his sculptures, performances, and light works. Born in Argentina and trained as a visual artist, Jorge is known for his *Light Works*, large-scale light projections, which incorporate a universally accessible lexicon of signs and symbols drawn from everyday life. Images of animals, birds, a human heart, and an eye are some of the myriad visual symbols that he has projected at the scale of architecture, transforming spaces and landscapes as diverse as the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Machu Picchu in Peru into hieroglyphic message boards. Invited to represent Argentina in the 1995 Venice Biennale, Jorge created *Light Messenger*, a project made in response to the demise of the Argentine pavilion in the Biennale gardens. Undeterred by having no fixed gallery space, he instead conceived of an ephemeral and mobile artwork and used the water surrounding the



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city as a mirror from which he reflected his now-familiar vocabulary of images onto the surface of the churches and palaces along the Grand Canal. A poetic response, the overlapping of images prompted alternative readings and personal interpretations of these emblematic structures.

Working together under the signature Lucy + Jorge Orta, the artists continue to generate projects that inspire communal interaction and exchange. *70 x 7 The Meal*, a project now in its thirty-third act, brings people together “to meet, to talk and to share a moment of reflection.” Each act of *The Meal* is for seven guests, who in turn invite seven others, and so on, as a symbolic reference to the biblical notion of infinity, in which an idea has no end, no limit, and no boundary. The project was inspired by the work of Padre Rafael García-Herreros, who organized a series of banquets in the 1960s to raise money for a social development project in Bogotá, Colombia. Reinterpreted by Lucy and Jorge, *The Meal* continues to provide an opportunity to bring communities together and share experiences. In 2000, in Dieuze, northeast France, three thousand people—the entire population of the town—picnicked at a table that ran the length of the main high street, and in 2001 nine hundred guests dined at three locations in Mexico City (including one of the city’s oldest convents). The following year, 168 people drawn from different sociocultural groups and nationalities dined together, seated at tables set in a circle in the Waltherplatz, the central piazza of Bolzano, Italy. In 2009, seventy local residents were invited to dine with Lucy and Jorge as well as artists Anne-Marie Culhane and Jo Salter at the Sherwell Church Hall, Plymouth, England, as part of a research project studying rural farming.



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Key to Lucy and Jorge’s work is their understanding of the need for novelty and surprise in daily life as a way to facilitate cross-generational cultural exploration and social interaction. Working with an ambidextrous approach, they create scenarios based on everyday activities and interactions that provide opportunities for reflection, connecting with audiences through projects that have a universal appeal. The result is a diversity of projects that tackle challenging issues and offer alternative modes of interpretation as a catalyst for social change.

The Ortas’ work owes much to historical artistic practices. Their work is rooted in the “happenings” of the 1960s, when artists such as Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Red Grooms devised performances and events that engaged viewers as active participants in their work—whether on a literally physical level through built structures or more viscerally through movement, sound, and light—in an effort to stimulate both emotional and intellectual responses. Correlations can also be made between their work and that of artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who in the mid-1970s famously focused his attention on Manhattan’s postindustrial waterfront with works such as *Day’s End (Pier 52)*, for which he cut a crescent-shaped hole into the wall of a warehouse on a pier at Gansevoort Street. His action opened up unexpected views across the Hudson River and prompted rediscovery of this largely forgotten area of the city. In addition to these earlier precedents, alignments can also be drawn with artists working today. These include Francis Alÿs, an artist based in Mexico City. Taking cues from the Situationists—whose unplanned *dérives*, or “drifts,” through the streets of Paris in the 1960s fostered new readings and interpretations of the urban structure—Alÿs creates work that deals with issues of place. For a piece called *When Faith Moves Mountains*, he enlisted the help of five hundred volunteers armed with shovels in a rural area near Lima, Peru, to move a sand dune four inches, essentially remapping the landscape of this area through physical labor. Other works are more directly political, such as *Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic*, from 2005, in which Alÿs walked from one end of Jerusalem to the other, carrying a can that dripped green paint. The line of dripped paint marked the original



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Green Line, the border zone determined after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War that indicated land under the control of the new state of Israel, which has since continued to be a site of political conflict. Relationships between Lucy and Jorge's work and those of other collectives such as the Copenhagen-based N55 are also apparent. For their *Land* project, N55 took small plots of land they acquired from regions as varied as northern Norway and the California desert, and then relocated these plots to more populated areas of Denmark, Holland, and Switzerland, as well as to the discarded wastelands of cities such as Chicago, ultimately dedicating the relocated land for public use. In these projects, an emphasis is placed on energizing our relationship to the world around us.

Correlations can also be made between Lucy + Jorge Orta's work and ongoing dialogues centered on critical design, a sphere of practice predominantly associated with London-based designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, who cite the importance of the conceptual underpinnings of design, as well as the field's potential as a catalyst for debate. Like Lucy and Jorge, they use products and services as a medium to stimulate discussion among the public and industry about the social, cultural, and ethical implications of objects. Many of their projects are collaborative and derive from research undertaken at the Royal College of Art, where Dunne heads the Design Interactions program. Their works—such as *Huggable Atomic Mushroom* (2004–5),



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which you can cuddle if you're worried about a nuclear attack, and *Hideaway Furniture* (2004–5), composed of a series of wooden boxes in which you can hide during times of trouble—address the dangers and fears in our lives, responding to current social and political conditions.

Fundamentally, what binds the output of these artists and designers is an interest in exploring the evolution of the underlying principles of contemporary society, exploiting their inherent properties for reexamination. Lucy + Jorge Orta, however, wish not only to conceptualize these issues through provocative modes of representation, but to discover the functional possibilities of art. By mining a diverse spectrum of artistic disciplines, they provide tools for eliciting change. "We act as a trigger mechanism," argues Jorge, raising awareness of global issues, generating a culture of debate, and ultimately inciting action. As their work indicates, Lucy + Jorge Orta are not afraid to engineer projects that are hard-hitting, both conceptually and in their distinctive visual grammar. Rather than providing a one-solution-fits-all approach, their projects are tailor-made and reference multiple creative disciplines as a call to arms for more collective and imaginative solutions to issues affecting lives worldwide. By imbuing their output with a comprehensible set of symbols that speak to the underlying themes in their work, they make evident the powerful part that images and objects play in our daily lives and the way in which they define the relationships we have with one other and with the world at large. Realizing that their role is only part of the solution, however, Lucy and Jorge rarely work alone, but endeavor to develop teams of experts from multiple fields to contribute to developing projects with a strong message founded on real-life situations and research.

This collaborative aspect of their practice and their interest in fostering experimental research has encouraged them to embark on their most ambitious cooperative project to date, the establishment of an arts center at Moulin Sainte-Marie, a former paper mill in the Brie region of France, just thirty-one miles from Paris. Envisioned as a site for artist-in-residence programs, exhibitions, installations, workshops, and other related practices, the scheme builds on a smaller-scale version of their vision, currently housed in a former dairy nearby, where they have worked on projects with artists ranging from Andrea Zittel to Mark Dion, as well as master students, educators, and curators from a range of institutions worldwide. Housed across a sixty-acre site, the new complex has the potential to be one of the most influential and vibrant arts organizations worldwide, providing a fixed address for both Studio Orta's productions as well as the work of others interested in similar methodologies and approaches. Currently in development, the project, a multiyear work in process, demonstrates Lucy + Jorge Orta's unwavering commitment and willingness to continuously test the boundaries of their practice in an effort to encourage a new paradigm for collective research and creative output.