



# LUCY ORTA

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FOR Lucy Orta architecture is one of the external reference points by which the individual self connects with the social self. Her medium, however, is not buildings but clothes, albeit garments that contain many of the attributes of built structures and which also function, crucially, as rudimentary shelters. Orta's mobile habitats do more than simply fulfil the utilitarian role of covering the body and providing it, when necessary, with an elementary form of dwelling. As an artist initially trained as a fashion designer, Orta is acutely conscious of the role of clothes not just in defining the self, but in articulating the social codes that bind communities.

While 'Refuge Wear', the multi-purpose protective clothing series of the early 1990s inspired by the first Gulf War and the growing phenomenon of refugees, which included *Habitent* (1992) and other wearable structures, highlighted the plight of homelessness and, by extension, social exclusion, 'Body Architecture' (c. 1995) focused more directly on the interdependency that underpins communities through designs that could be worn both individually and reconfigured to form communal habitations. With 'Nexus Architecture', exhibited at the Venice and Johannesburg Biennales in 1995 and '97, emotional and social ties between people were explored symbolically by means of tube-like appendages that attached one person to another, often in a long chain, in a literal expression of solidarity and group identity. Other projects, such as 'Modular Architecture' (from 1996), have comprised sets of components – domes, zips, panels, pouches, extensions and so on that can be assembled into multiple formats including tents, sleeping cocoons, backpacks, furniture or even entire villages – whose function

only becomes fully revealed when integrated into a larger and more complex whole.

It is in these more elaborate constructions that Orta's designs are at their most political, particularly when covered with slogans, texts, images and other cultural signifiers that allude to contemporary political, social or ethical issues. But the various 'solutions' that Orta's structures propose (though she would emphatically reject the finality of such a term) rarely reflect her individual response to a perceived issue or need. In most cases her projects are the product of workshops with selected social groups who undertake the design and production under her guidance. When the team has arrived at a successful prototype, the process frequently culminates in a public performance. Since so many of the communities with which she collaborates have been rendered invisible by circumstance, visibility is one of Orta's key concerns, and bodily participation is central to activating a design's expressive characteristics and attracting public and media attention.

Orta's work defies easy categorisation, touching on design, installation, performance, social and environmental intervention and political and ideological activism, to name the most obvious. Of all artists engaged with what is frequently described as 'public art', her work is among those that most comprehensively interrogate the term. And as her strategies have evolved, her concerns have also changed from those of clothing, habitation and social exclusion, to food, sustainability, the environment and consumerism. In recent years food waste has emerged as a major theme, resulting in several projects in which discarded





Above: *Modular Architecture – The Unit x 10*, 1999. Courtesy: the artist. Below: *Life Nexus Village Fête*, 2000. Courtesy: Galleria Continua, San Gimignano. Photo: Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth. Opposite: *Life Nexus Village Fête*, 2000, detail. Courtesy: Galleria Continua, San Gimignano. Photo: Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.

produce has been salvaged from markets, preserved or cooked and then served ritually at a series of public meals (*All in One Basket* and *70x7, The Meal*, 1996–2000). At the same time, the audiences and social systems that she targets have progressed from local communities and the disenfranchised sectors of society to corporations and even governments. In 2001 her installation, *Vehiconnector* – a collection of field ambulances converted into survival units covered in slogans addressing poverty, BSE, drinking water, refugees, Rwanda and other topical issues – was sited outside the G8 summit on the environment in Trieste.

Orta has always maintained that her work is as much a poetic as a practical response to contemporary conditions, employing strategies of metaphor and *détournement*. For *Tatipotent Architecture* and *Connector Body*, produced for 'Arte all'Arte' in Italy in 2004–5, the historic buildings of Buonconvento in Tuscany – both actual and models made from metal armatures – were strung with clothes and filled with organic blown-glass forms that referred to religious beliefs as well as traditional regional crafts and industries. For once, it seems, the elemental values of functionalism, wearability and survival receded, and the buildings themselves emerged as protagonists. However, references to the body remained present even here as metaphor for a structure that supports a set of life-giving functions, which in turn maintain the individual and, by implication, the wider social sphere.

Such developments nevertheless prompt questions. As Orta periodically shifts her gaze from the global to the local in search of new themes and imagery, it is intriguing to speculate whether she can continue to discover the connective principles that have enabled her work to resonate so successfully across peoples and cultures, and to unite her own, very diverse audience.

