

LUCY+ JORGE ORTA: POTENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

Cells are a part of the human body; they are at the origin of its being, its feelings, its emotions, and its sufferings. Thus, they speak the language of the body. There are also cells of habitation. The relationship between people and their habitat is formed in this metaphorical cell. Living and being become a single and unique life experience. CRISTINA MOROZZI

Potential Architecture explores artists Lucy+Jorge Orta's recent architectural endeavors that derive from their fascination with cell biology and the process of differentiation. Through drawings and sculpture, the artists conceptualize the communication process the human cell undertakes from its embryonic state, and the infinite transformations that lead to defined structural organisms.

This new body of work draws from Lucy+Jorge Orta's artistic practice, grounded in the universal concerns of community, shelter, migration, and sustainable development.

Potential Architecture is a powerful rejoinder to the arbitrary boundaries that define art, architecture, and design.

POTENTIAL ARCHITECTURE



LUCY+JORGE ORTA

[DAMIANI]

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LUCY+JORGE ORTA
Potential Architecture

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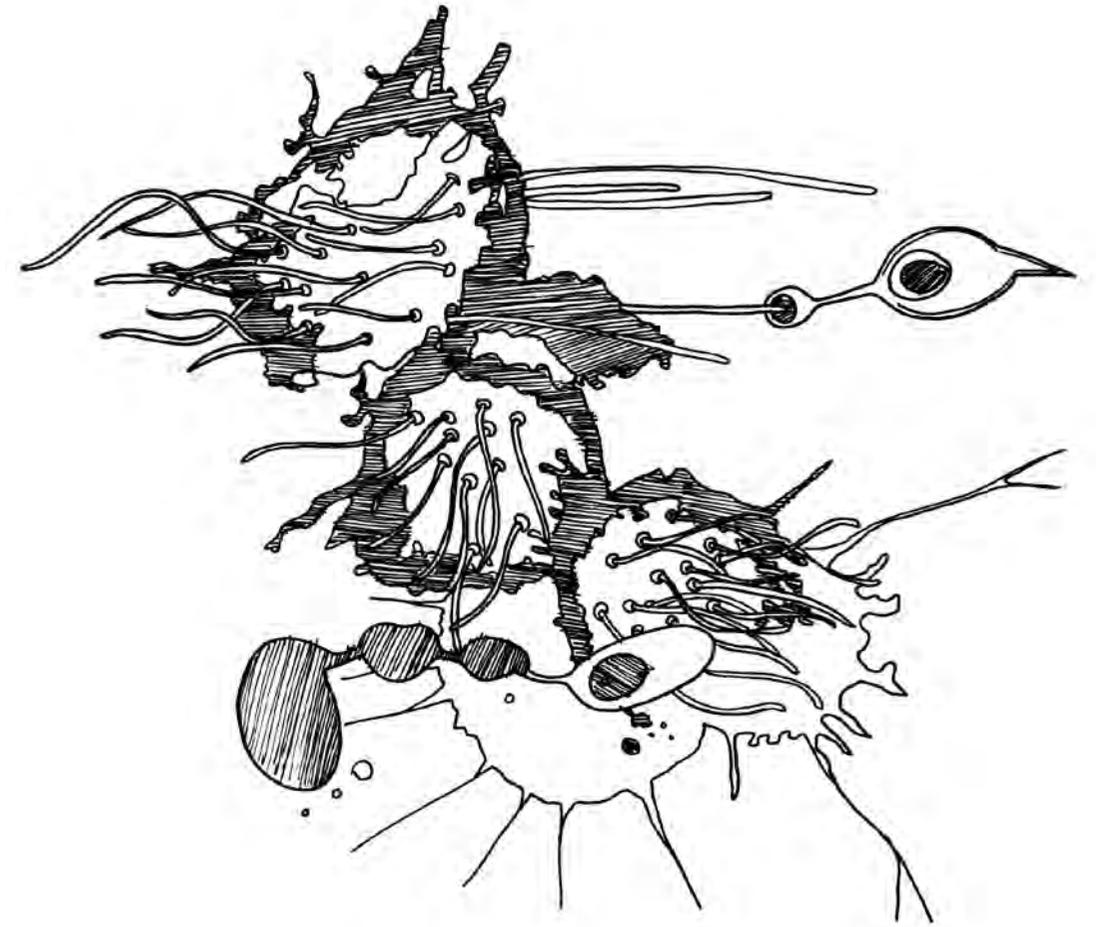
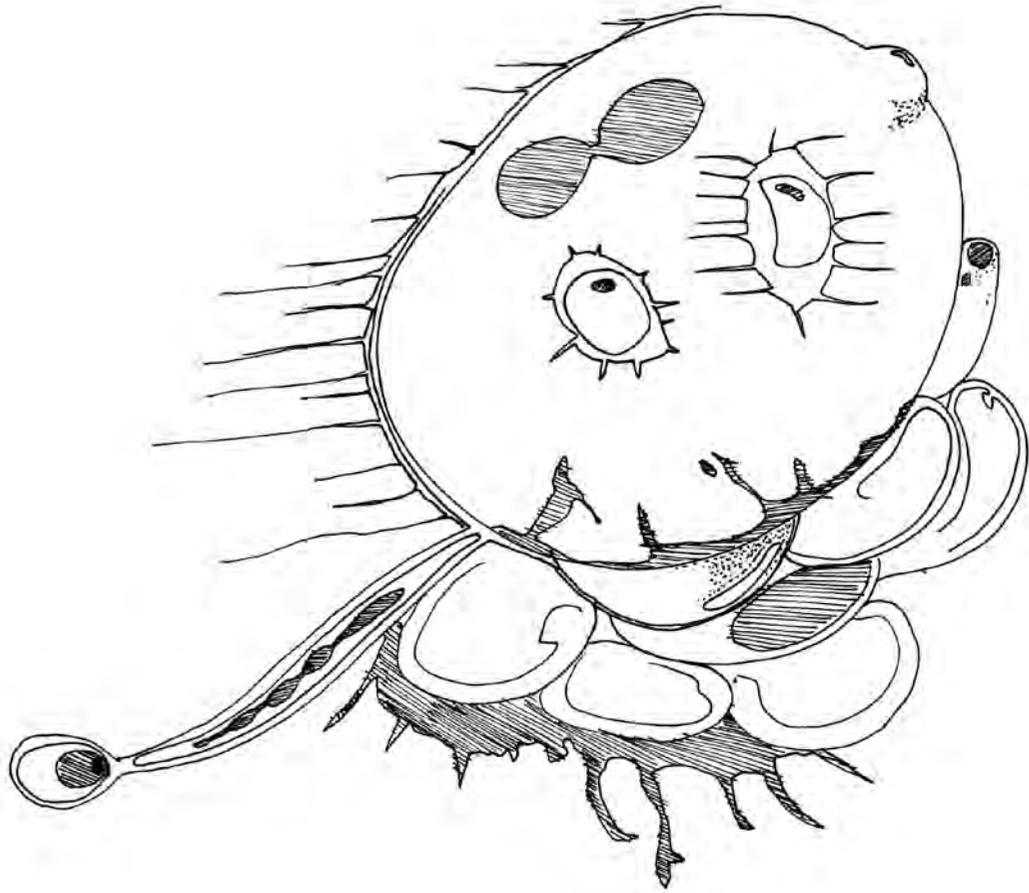
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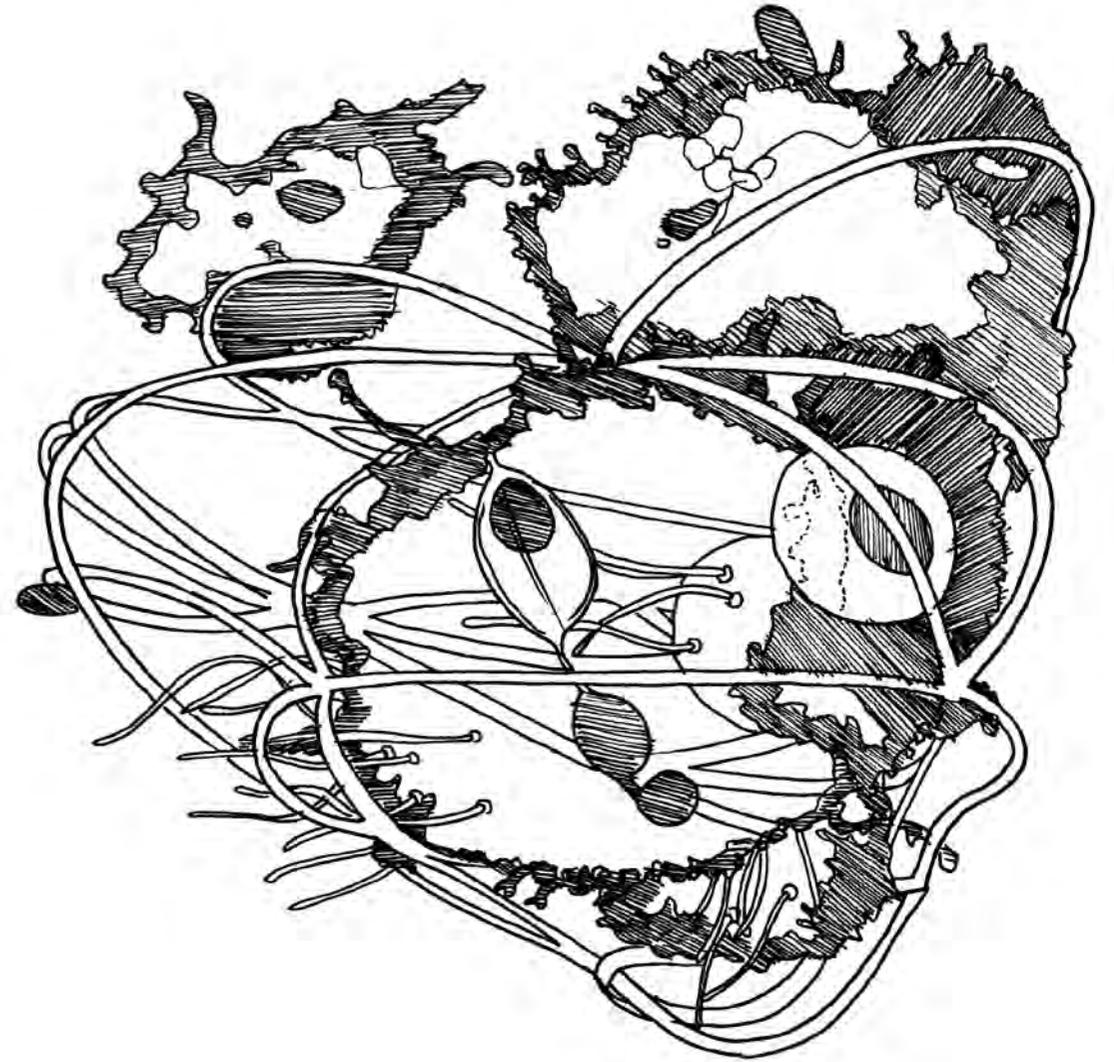
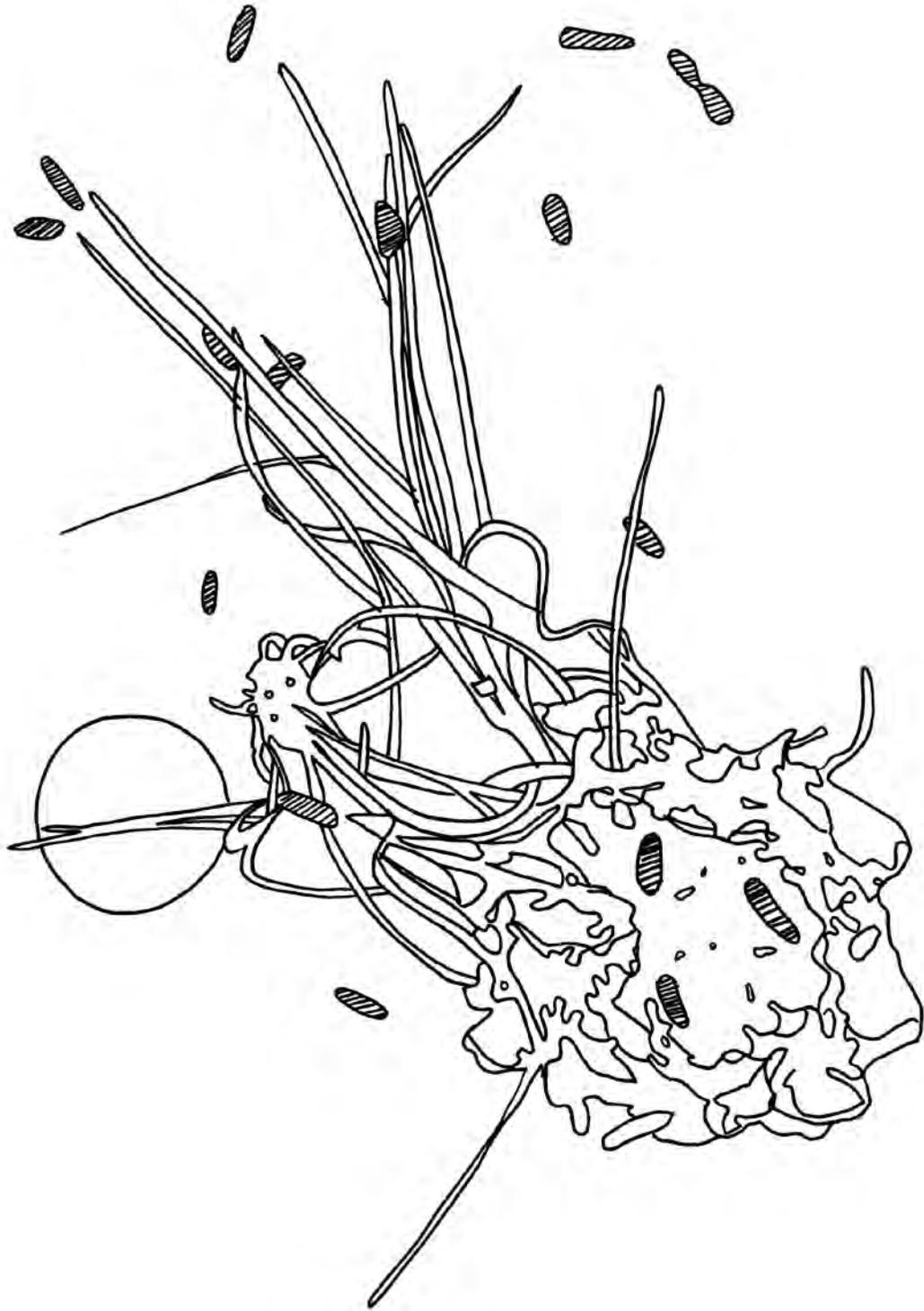
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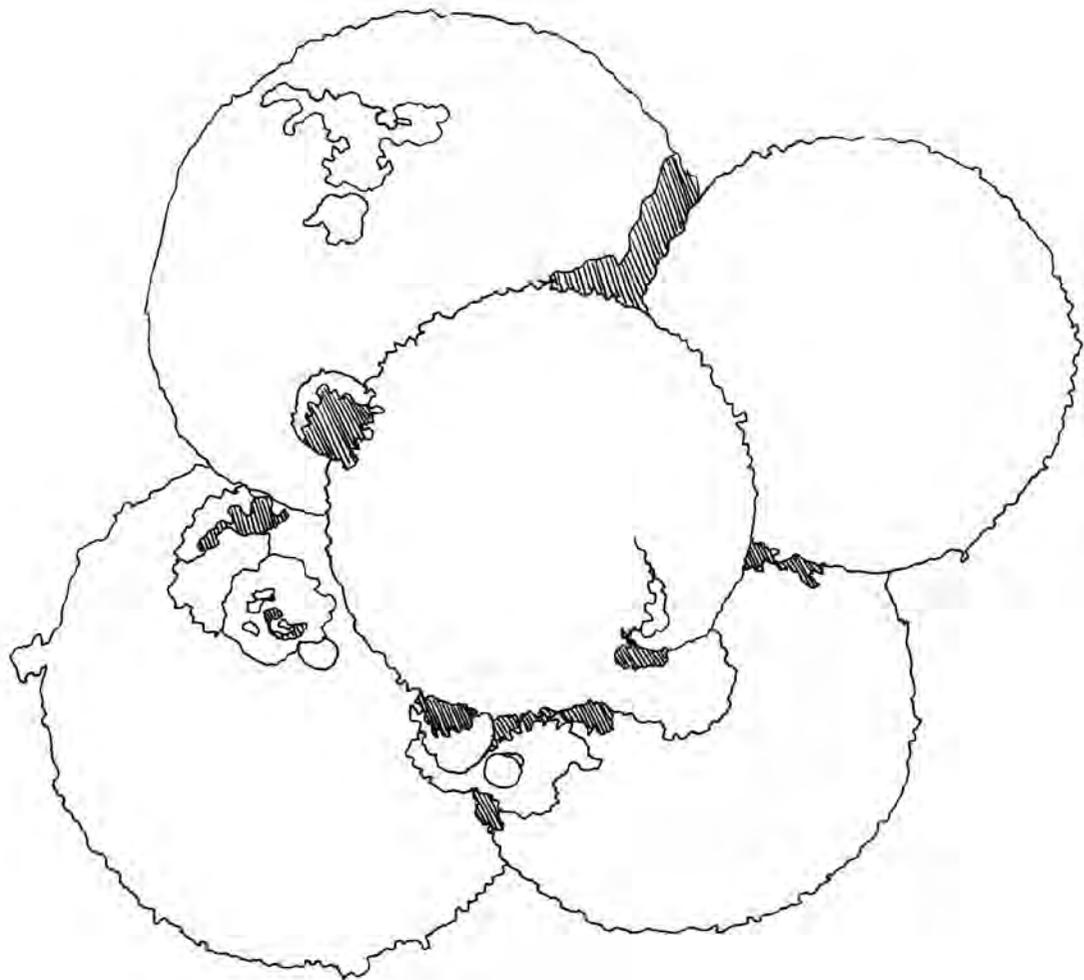
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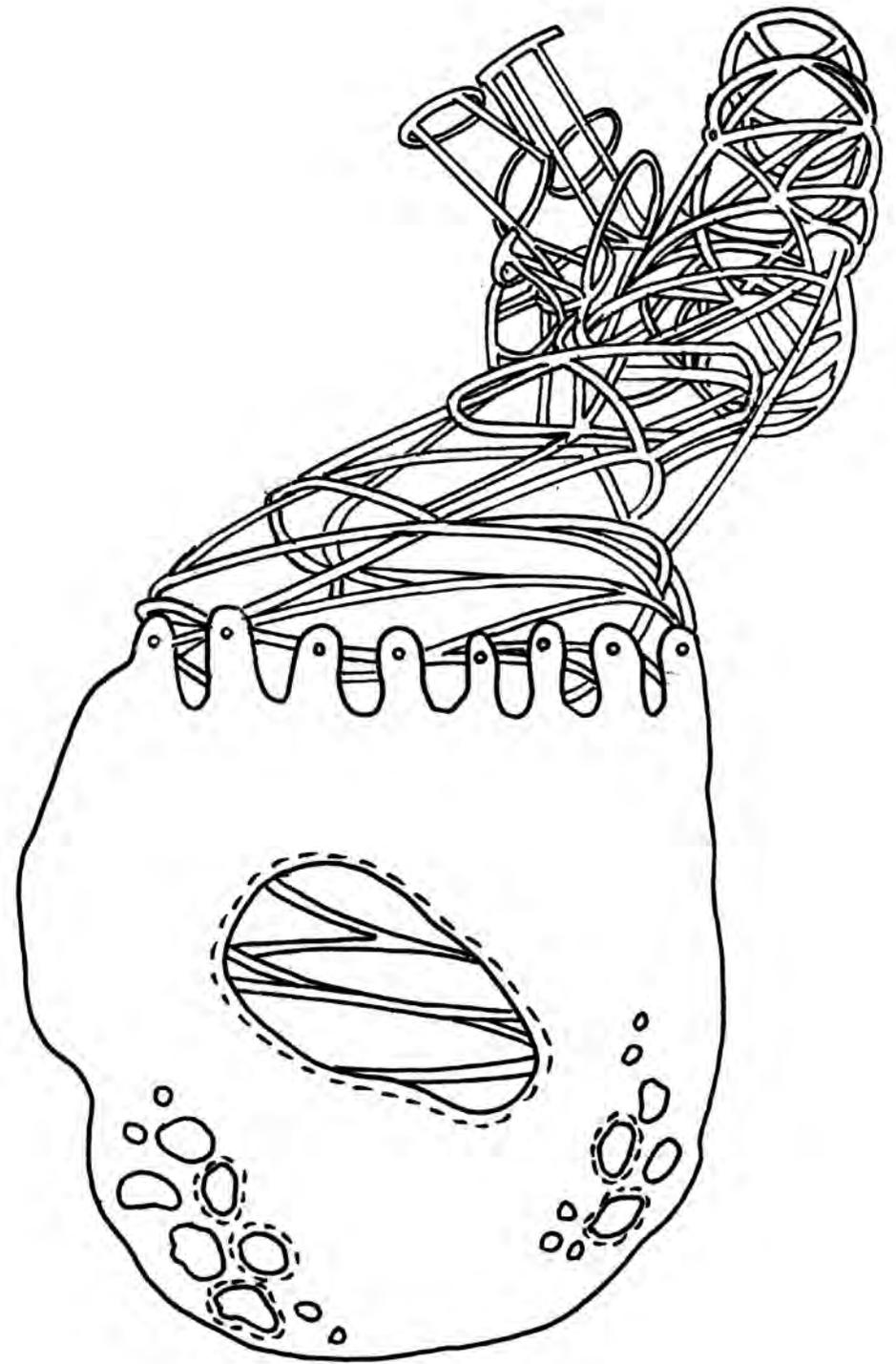
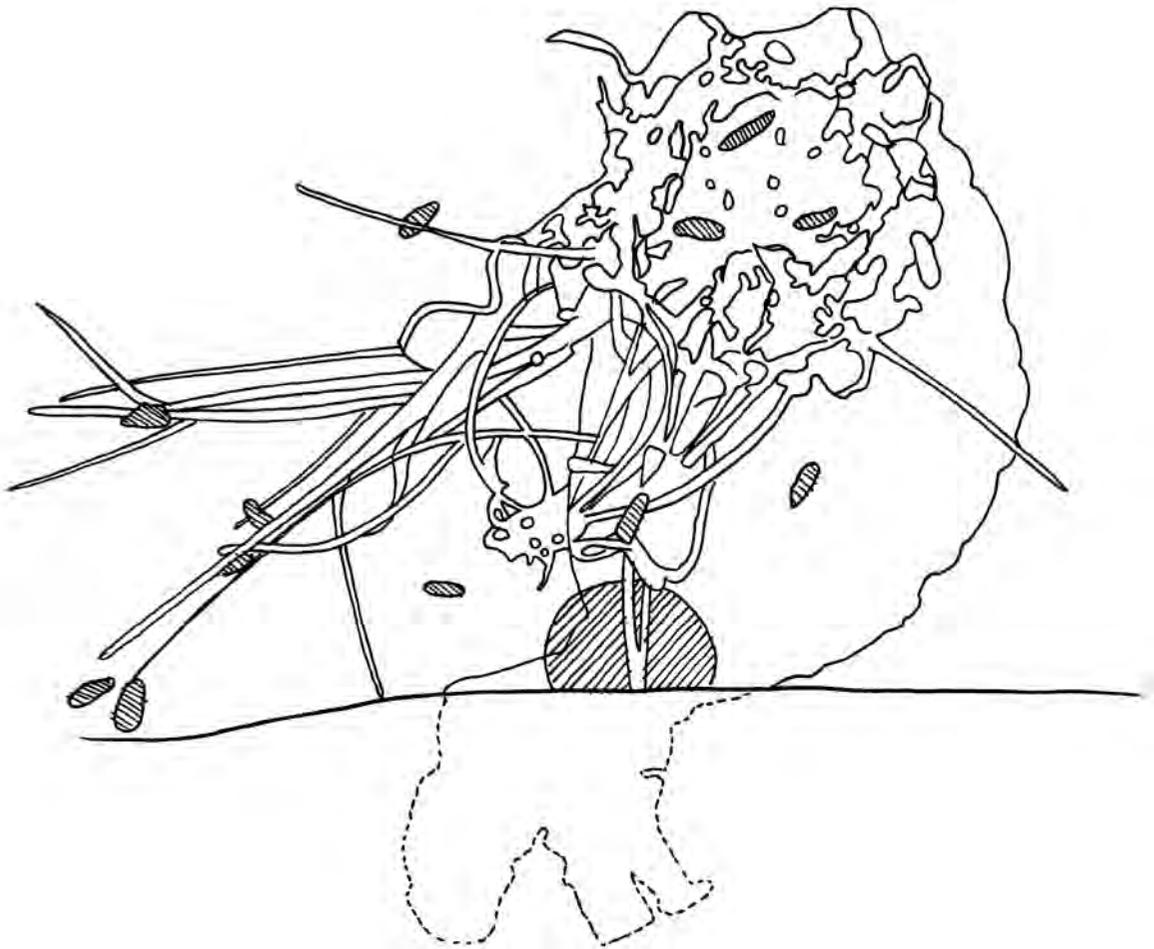
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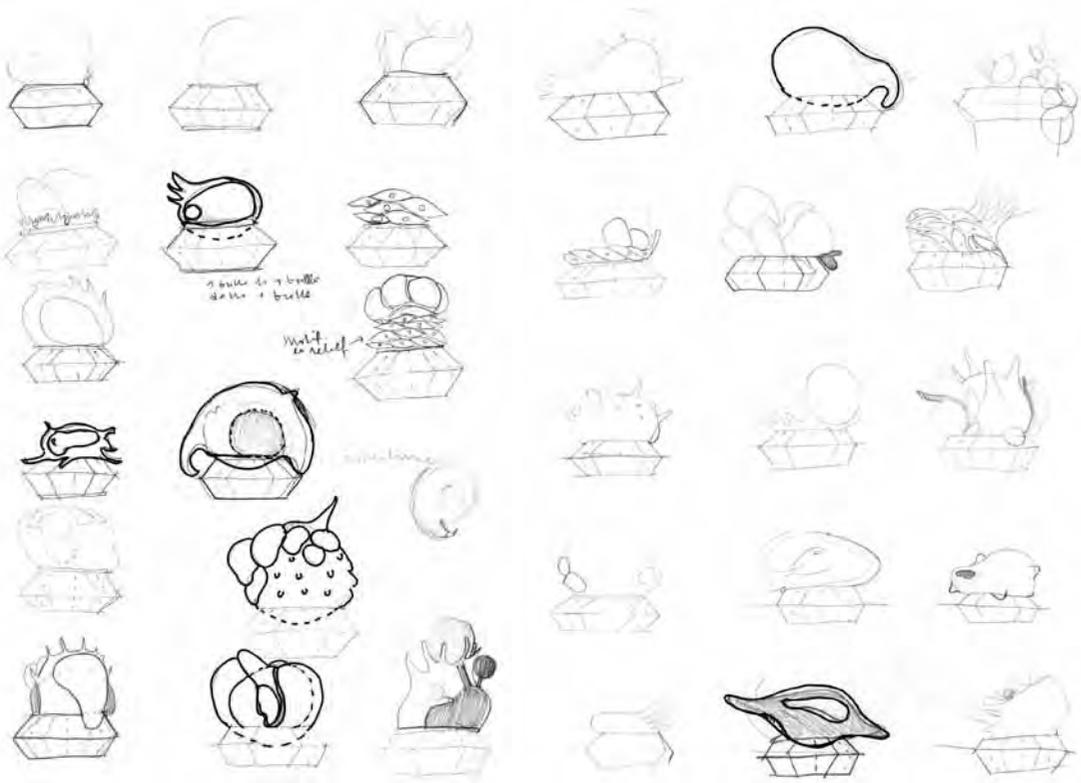












2 balls de + bubble
de la + bubble

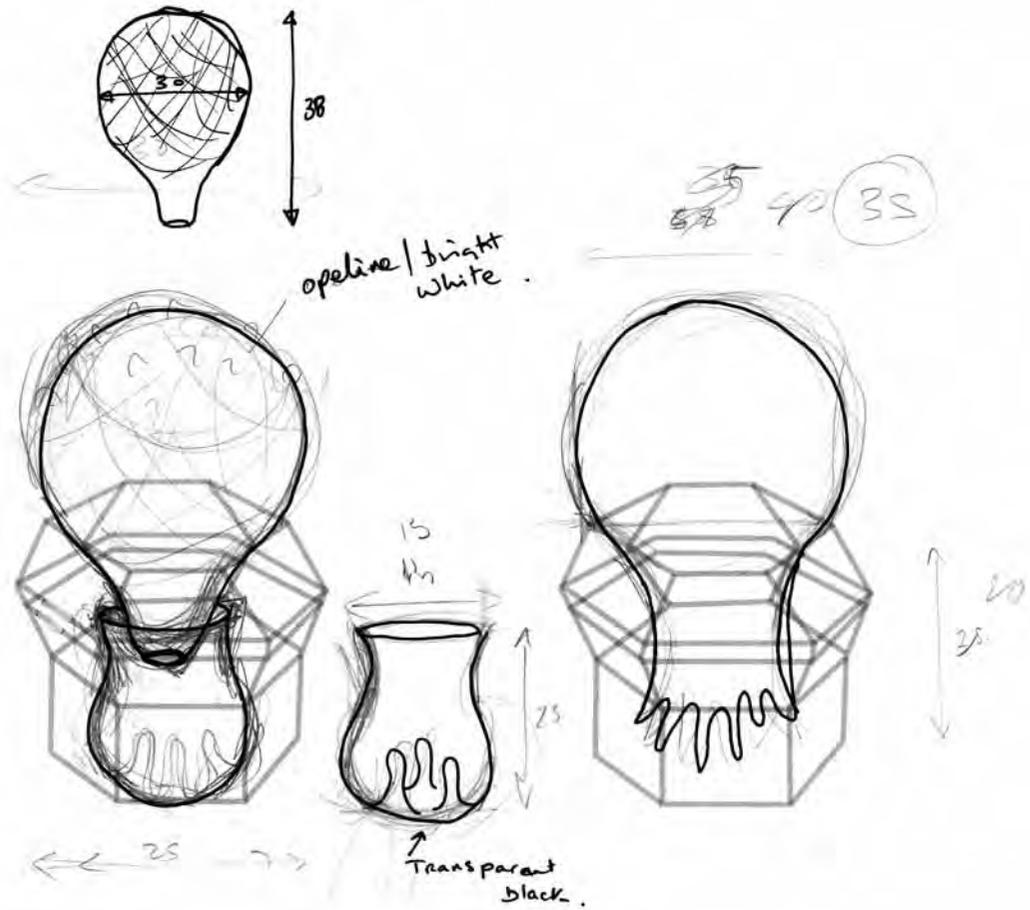
Mult
in relief

Plusieurs
"bubbles" créent
une dynamique

amic
(cousin)

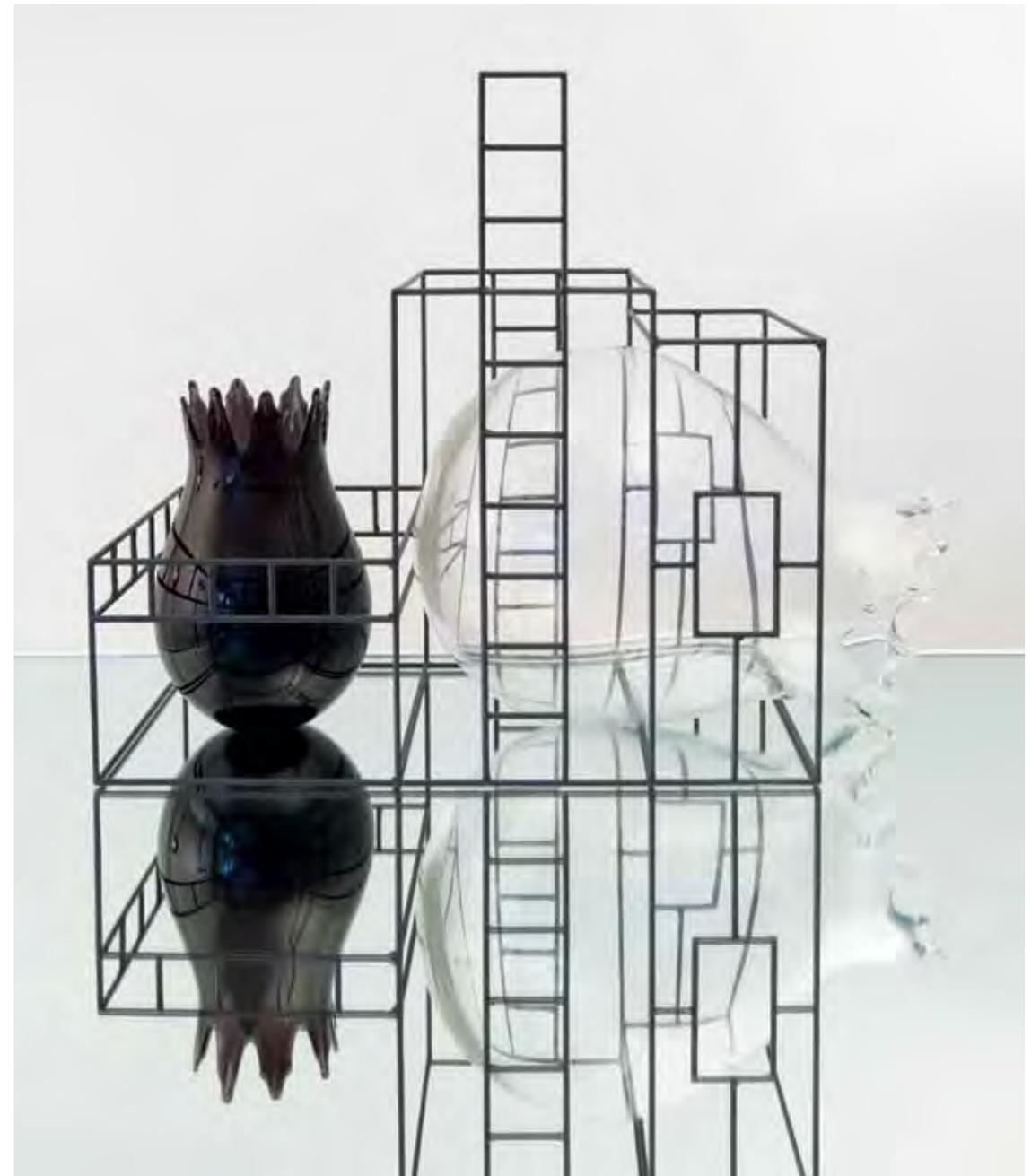
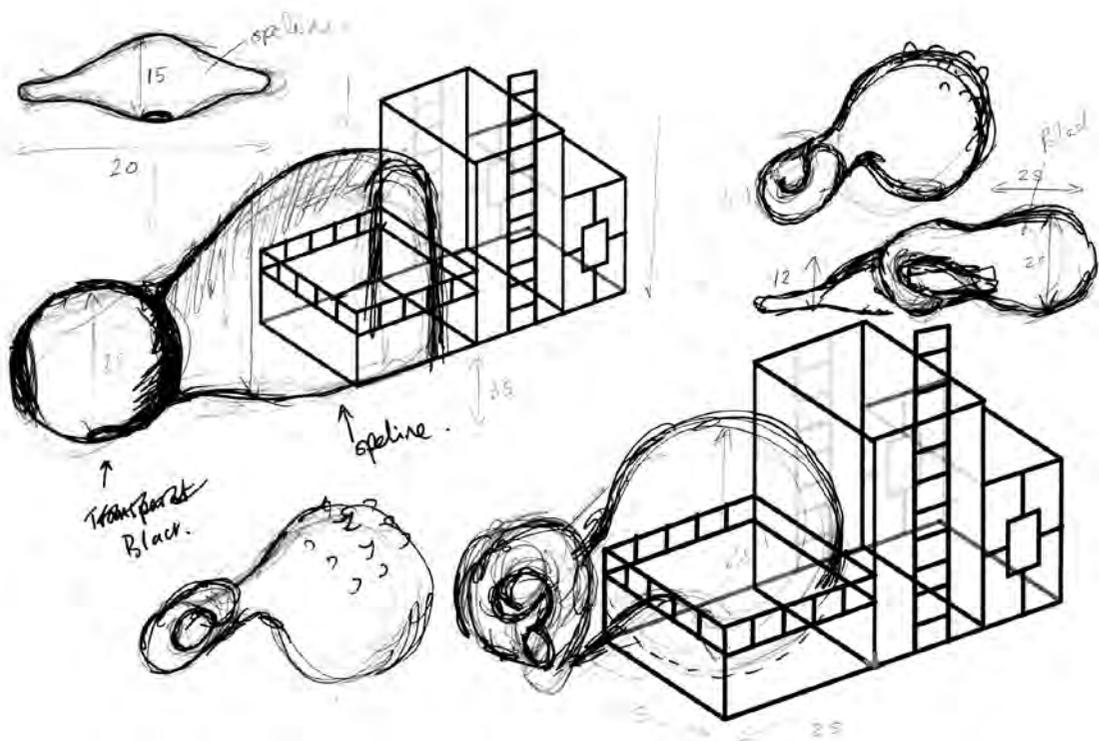
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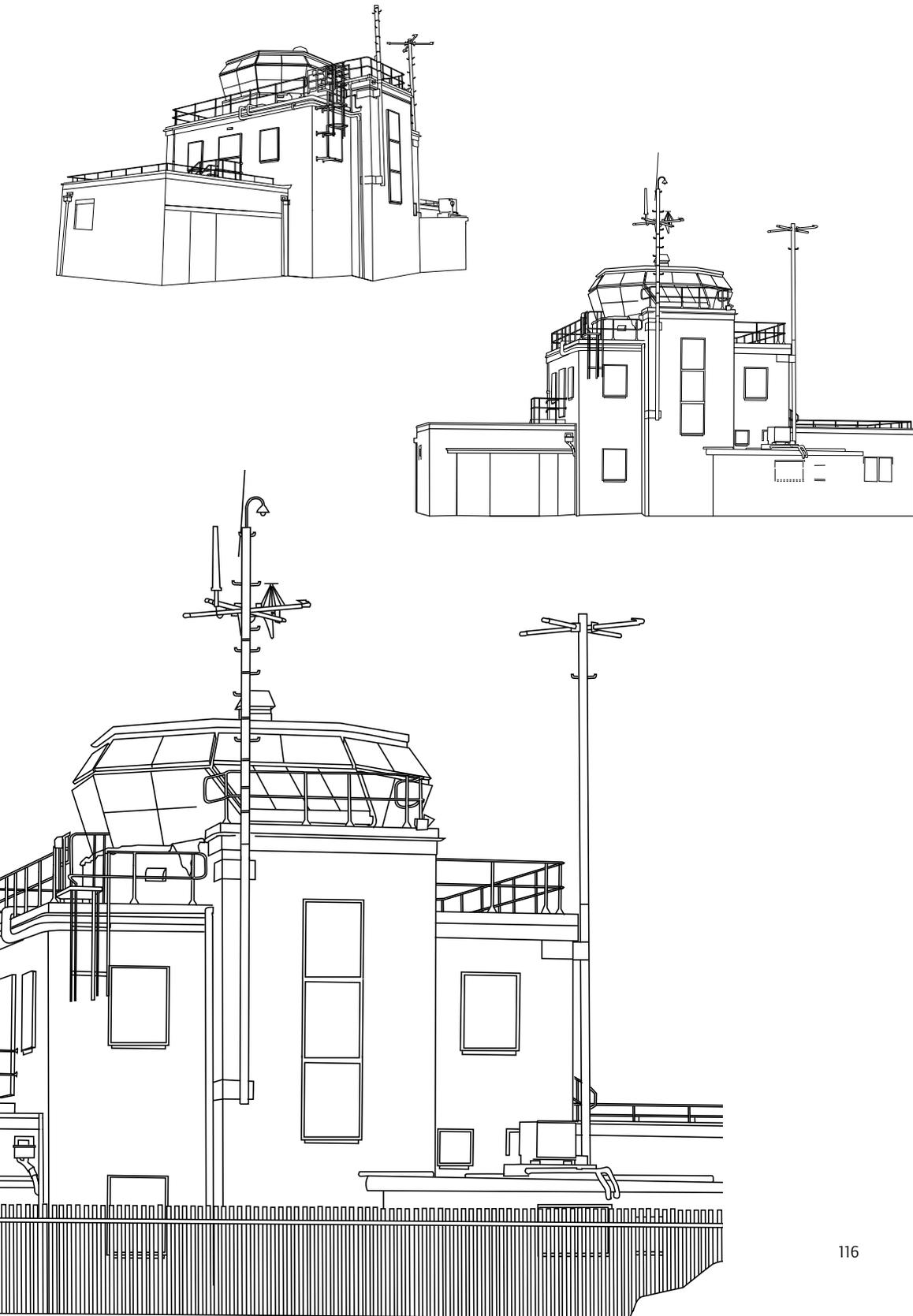
(left)
Totipotent Architecture - Control Tower Observatory, 2008
Sketchbook drawing

(right)
Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Observatory, 2008



(left)
 Totipotent Architecture - Control Tower Visitor Center, 2008
 Sketchbook drawing

(right)
 Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Visitor Center, 2008



SASHA ROSENEIL

Architectures of Resistance and Transformation

Re-encountering the queer spaces and relationality of Greenham Common

"You'd get this sort of freedom to let your mind wander outside its normal confines, which you can't do if you're confined by a building, and your thoughts are shaped by that building. If you sit around a fire, it's dark, and after a while you could be living in any century, and any country, and your whole being is totally free from those restrictions. Women felt outside normal behavior."

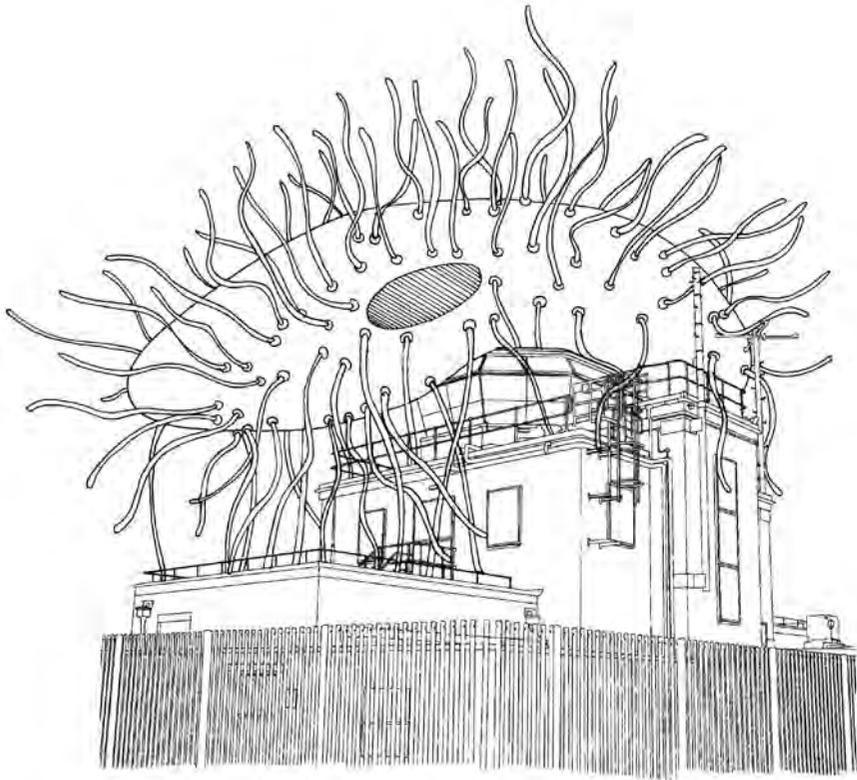
Carmel Cadden, Peace Camper, on living at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp

Back in the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, Ronald Reagan was in the White House, and the Cold War had been reignited. NATO was stationing a new generation of cruise and Pershing intercontinental nuclear missiles across Western Europe and the Soviet Union was doing the same in the east.

In this context, Her Majesty's Government produced a booklet, *Protect and Survive*, which was to be delivered to every household in Britain should the threat of nuclear war escalate significantly and was also available for sale to those of a survivalist mentality who wished to prepare themselves in advance.

Protect and Survive instructed the man of the nuclear family, through clear line drawings, how to create a "fall out room" that would (supposedly) be shielded from radioactive fallout, and how to build a refuge within the fallout room—by removing doors from their hinges and creating a lean-to shelter, weighed down with bags of earth. Food should be gathered, ready for the moment when the family would enter the shelter to face their future, crammed together as the bombs rained down outside.

In 1981 a group of women organized a walk from South Wales to the United States air force base at Greenham Common to protest plans to install cruise missiles there. When the government and media failed to heed their calls for a public debate between the women protesters and the British Minister of Defence, they chained themselves to the gates of the base, echoing the tactics of the suffragettes, and the Women's Peace Camp began. Greenham became the focus for a new wave of feminist antinuclear activism and an inspiration for the peace movement across Europe and beyond, mobilizing over the years many tens of thousands of women, who went to the camp for a few hours, a few days, or made their home there for months and sometimes years.



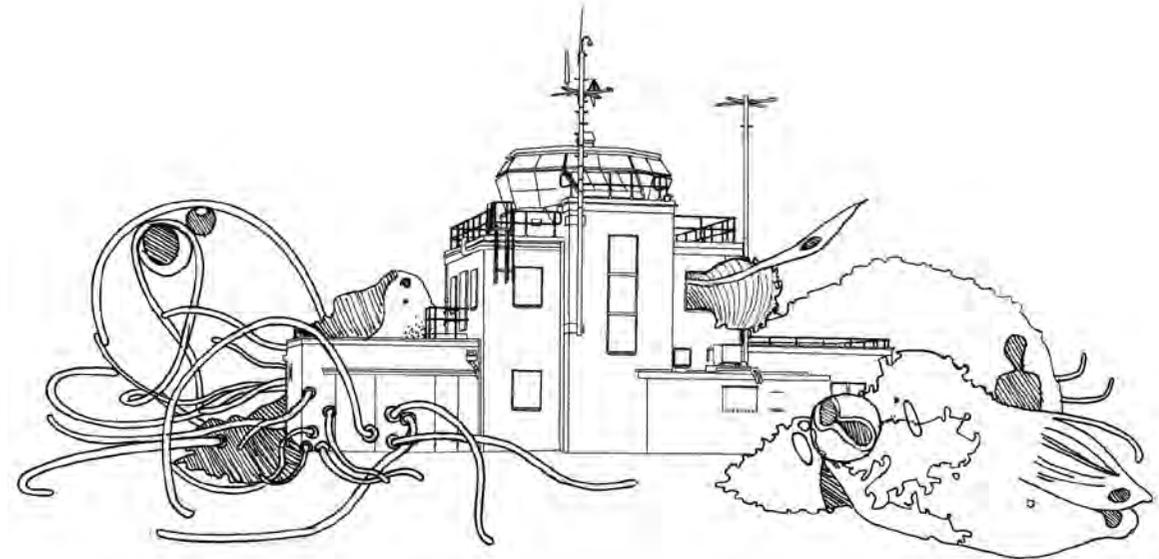
There is much to be said about the cultural significance and impact of Greenham, but to bring the memory of Greenham into dialogue with Lucy + Jorge Orta's work, I will focus on the queer architectures of Greenham's opposition to nuclear weapons and to the militarized power relations that divide the peoples of the world. Orta's work might be read as speaking directly to, and against, such systems of social organization.

Women from all over Britain and beyond, aged from their mid-teens to their 70s and 80s, left their homes, and sometimes their families, to go to Greenham. They were from all class backgrounds, and many different occupations. They had previously been politically active as socialists, anarchists, communists, environmentalists, animal liberationists, liberals, Quakers, trade unionists, students, and feminists of every hue—and some were political novices. They arrived as unquestioning heterosexuals, occasional bisexuals, and con-

firmed lesbians. Together they built a community of protest in which domestic life was lived outdoors, in which homes were turned inside out, and conventions turned upside down.

Sleeping shelters, or "benders," were built from plastic sheeting, canvas, and string; meals were cooked on open fires, which burnt wood gathered from the Common that had to be chopped and stored. Greenham women had to develop new skills and capacities: the practical, outdoor survival skills that had, during the past hundred years or so, become increasingly gendered masculine; the political skills and courage to speak in public and explain their work at the hundreds of meetings and rallies to which they were invited; the personal confidence to talk to the media, to represent themselves and claim their voices as actors on the global stage.

In so doing they questioned and transformed themselves, redesigning the relations of gender and sexu-



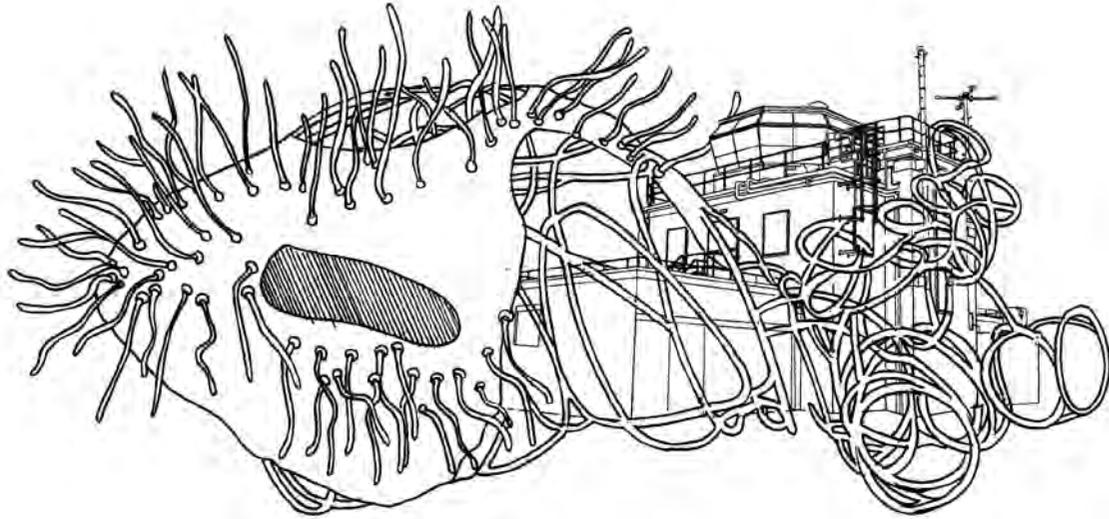
ality by which they had lived as they began to think and feel differently about what it might mean to be a woman in a male-dominated, unequal world.

At Greenham, personal life was radically de-privatized—and eating, sleeping, and even toileting were politicized. Food was collectively provisioned, and the politics and ethics of what was eaten were fiercely debated. Conventional family life, and the heterosexuality and monogamy on which it is built, were named and critiqued as women found themselves developing close, sometimes sexual, relationships of love and friendship with the other women with whom they were living and protesting. Bodies that sat together around the fire often lay down to sleep together in large communal benders, or just under the stars. Daily ablutions were carried out outside, showers fabricated and strung up in trees, water heated on the fire. Shit-pits were dug and moved around, so as to live lightly on the land.

The liminal space of this women's community, which was right up against the fences of patriarchal militarism, constituted a prefigurative, utopian world apart, where radically counternormative ways of being and living were forged. And the state objected.

Over and over again the camp was evicted—initially from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Transport land occupied by the Main Gate camp, and later, after a change in the law, from the common land on which the other camps were based.

For several years evictions took place up to three times a day, seven days a week—a cat and mouse game between the specially appointed team of bailiffs and the women. But Greenham fundamentally queered the norms of political protest. It tested the tolerance of a liberal democratic state that allows dissent as long as, at the end of the day, protesters pack up their banners and

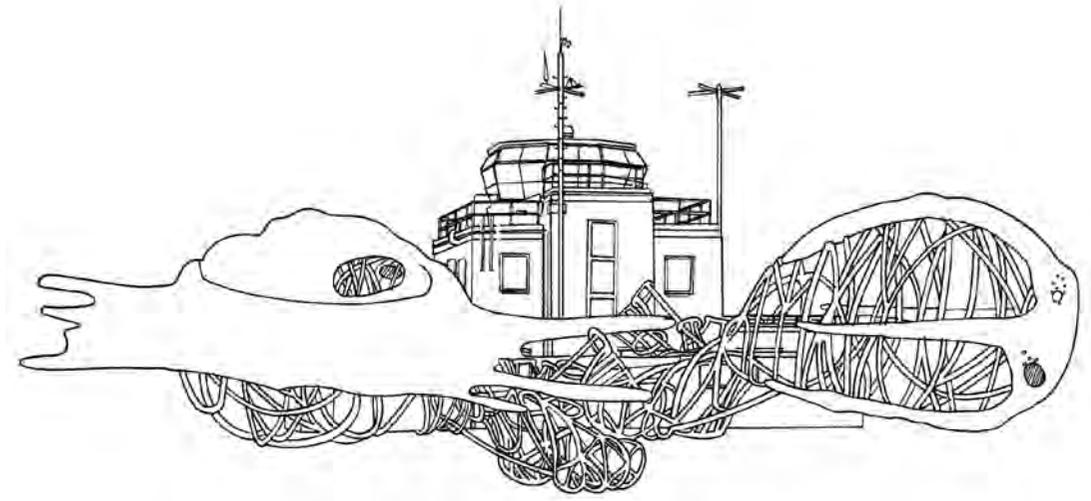


head back to their families, returning to the project of reproducing the status quo. The women of Greenham would not give up—they would not go home, as the tabloid press and politicians so regularly instructed them.

And this was, in large part, because Greenham became home, and the bonds of friendship, care, affection, and love forged at Greenham became the life-sustaining forces, the architectures of life, that women were choosing over the homes, families, and social structures whence they came. Greenham made a queer home—it was a home of women choosing to live and act without men, unprotected and unfortified by husbands and fathers. It was a home that was open to the elements, to the gaze and scrutiny of the world's media, and to vigilante violence by groups of men, both the soldiers and policemen sanctioned by the state as well as those acting less legally, who attacked women in their tents and benders, and

around the campfires, with bricks and stones and red-hot poker and verbal abuse.

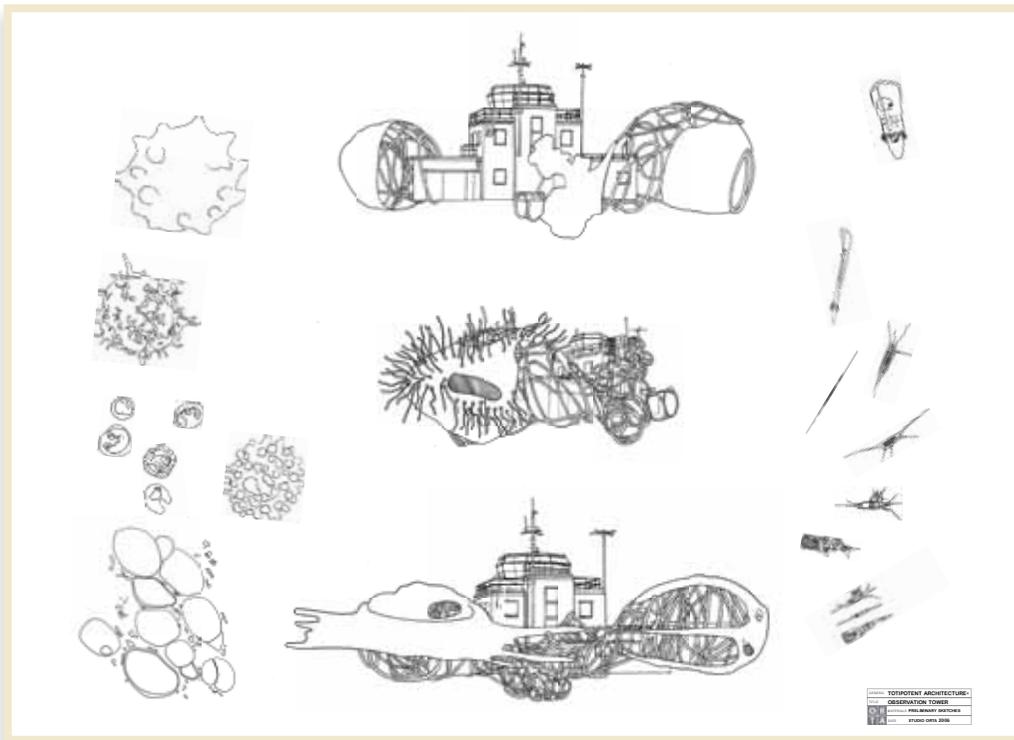
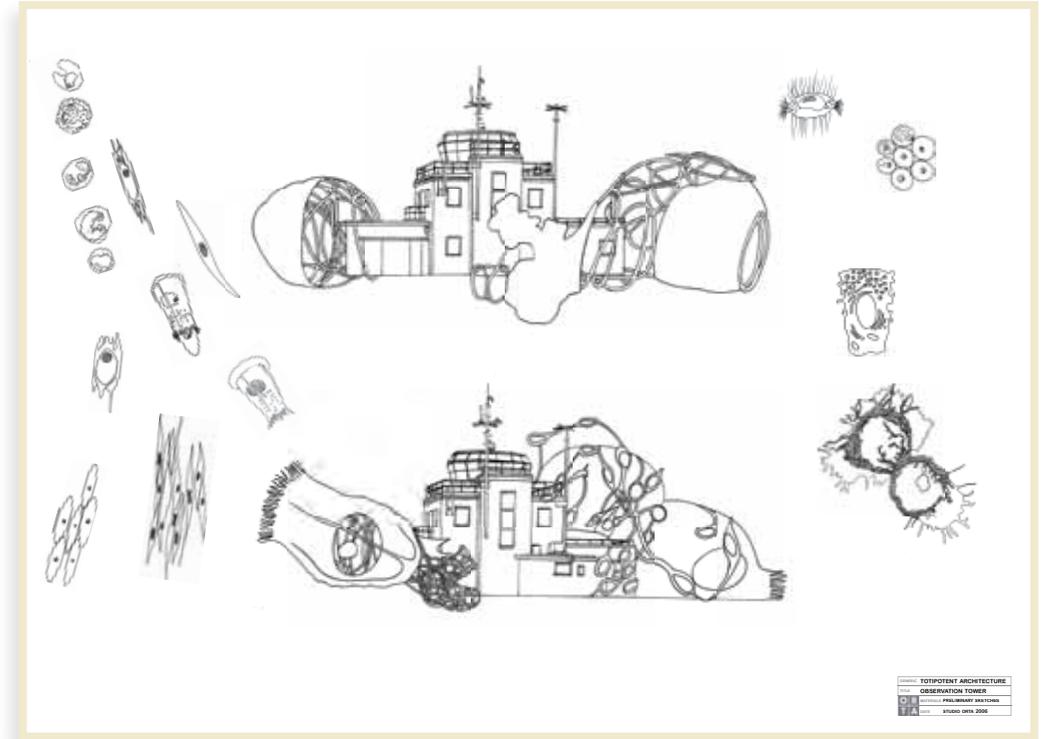
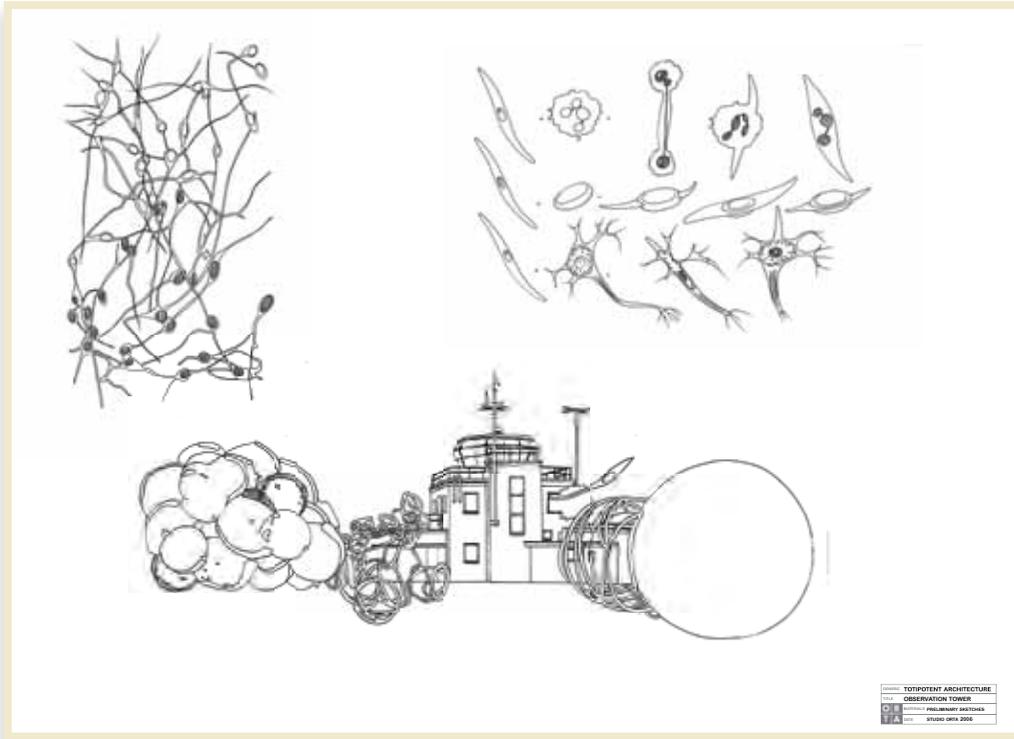
Greenham was a home open to any woman who wished to make it one—there was no membership test to pass, no rent or fee to pay, no set of beliefs to sign up to in advance. Women came and went as they pleased, passing through and settling, settling and passing through. It was a fluid home, that moved around, never quite landing up in exactly the same spot twice after each eviction, and gradually, over time, constituted of fewer and fewer possessions, and less and less domestic comfort. The caravans and real mattresses of the first year gave way to benders and tents with straw-filled bunks, and finally just Goretex sleeping bags under plastic sheeting, which is, of course, the mirror opposite of normal life, where domestic time and progression through a normative life course are marked by the acquisition of things and the accretion of domestic comforts.



Greenham was a home that rested on a belief in the commons and in shared custodianship of the earth. It resisted claims to ownership of the land that it occupied, and the well-intentioned offers of wealthy supporters to buy adjacent land to make the camp permanent. It was a home in which debate, disagreement, difference, diversity, and sheer, obstinate individuality were valued, while also emphasizing communality, collective decision-making, equality, and participation. It was a home that sought constantly to decenter itself—to resist the centripetal forces of the movements that looked toward it to provide continuity and leadership, looking instead outward to anti-imperialist, antinuclear, and feminist struggles across the world in Nicaragua, Namibia, South Africa, indigenous communities in Australia and the Pacific Islands, as well as in mining communities, women's aid and rape crisis centers nearer to home. And Greenham was a home that ultimately dissipated as its inhabitants moved on to

other things, leaving only the traces of its history on the Common.

The making of homes in public, the political act of "occupation" as a form of resistance, has recently been revived on a global scale with the wave of Occupy protests in Western cities, the persistent encampments of the "indignados" in austerity-riven southern Europe, and the protests of the Arab Spring. The tents and outdoor sleeping of today's protesters echo the repertoire of action inaugurated by Greenham, and their fluid, non-hierarchical, networked forms of organization resonate with the architectures of resistance that Greenham, over three decades earlier, referred to as "weaving the web." Creating connections among people that operate laterally rather than vertically, that might seem fragile but are actually highly tensile and resilient, there is a powerful synergy between these new modes of political relationality and the social bonds of, and through which, the Orta's work speaks.



(left & right)
 Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Control Tower, 2007
 Pencil, pigment ink on Fabriano paper
 92.5 x 4 x 72.5cm (box framed)



Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Control Tower, 2009-13



(left)
Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Observatory, 2008

(right)
Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Observatory Variant, 2009-13



(left)
Totipotent Architecture - Observatory in Red, 2009-13

(right)
Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Visitors Center, 2008

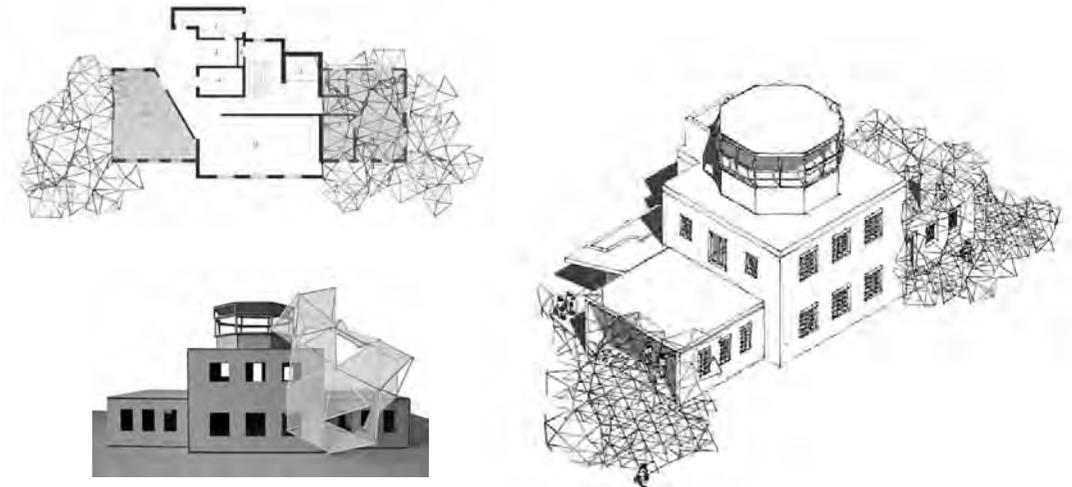
Potential Architecture Greenham Common Control Tower

In June 2012 Professor Lucy Orta became a Design Fellow of the Arts University Bournemouth. The values embodied in the work of Lucy + Jorge Orta echo those of the University, which strives for an interdisciplinary context to develop multiple forms of creative practice in art, design, media, and performance. The Arts University Bournemouth is founded on creative studio practices enhancing individual specialisms alongside complementary disciplines. Students are encouraged to be both skilled and critical in their own field, and to be able to contribute to and draw from interdisciplinary working.

In keeping with the spirit of our mission, and with that of Lucy+Jorge Orta, Lucy Orta proposed to conduct a project with first year students in the Masters of Architecture program. The brief absorbed the students (Nicole Dobbie, Ali Jafari, Melanie Kaviani, and Andrei Keltos), who were asked to find creative responses to Orta's *Totipotent Architecture - Greenham Common Control Tower* artworks developed from the artists' considerable on-site research over a four-year period (2004–2008). *Totipotent Architecture* consists of a series

of small, architecture-like sculptures (maquettes) employing the technique of blown glass (organic shapes) and steel (contours of the building), as well as drawings showing cell-like structures emerging (or perhaps exploding), in this case from the Greenham Common Control Tower that overlooks the former RAF station and later Cold War US air base. In this collaboration, the students saw themselves as both interpreters and co-creators. In discussion with Lucy Orta, Sasha Roseneil, Professor of Sociology and Social Theory at Birkbeck College, and Ed Frith, architect and Arts University Bournemouth Masters Course Leader, the students explored ways of transforming the Control Tower and interpreting the *Totipotent Architecture* project into architectural propositions. The aim was to return the building to "usefulness" as a community asset, while establishing a memorial to both the converging histories of the airfield and the Peace Camps.

The resulting student proposals are an attempt to balance the role of the building as memorial, museum, and municipal venue, addressing the transformation from military to civic. The bound-

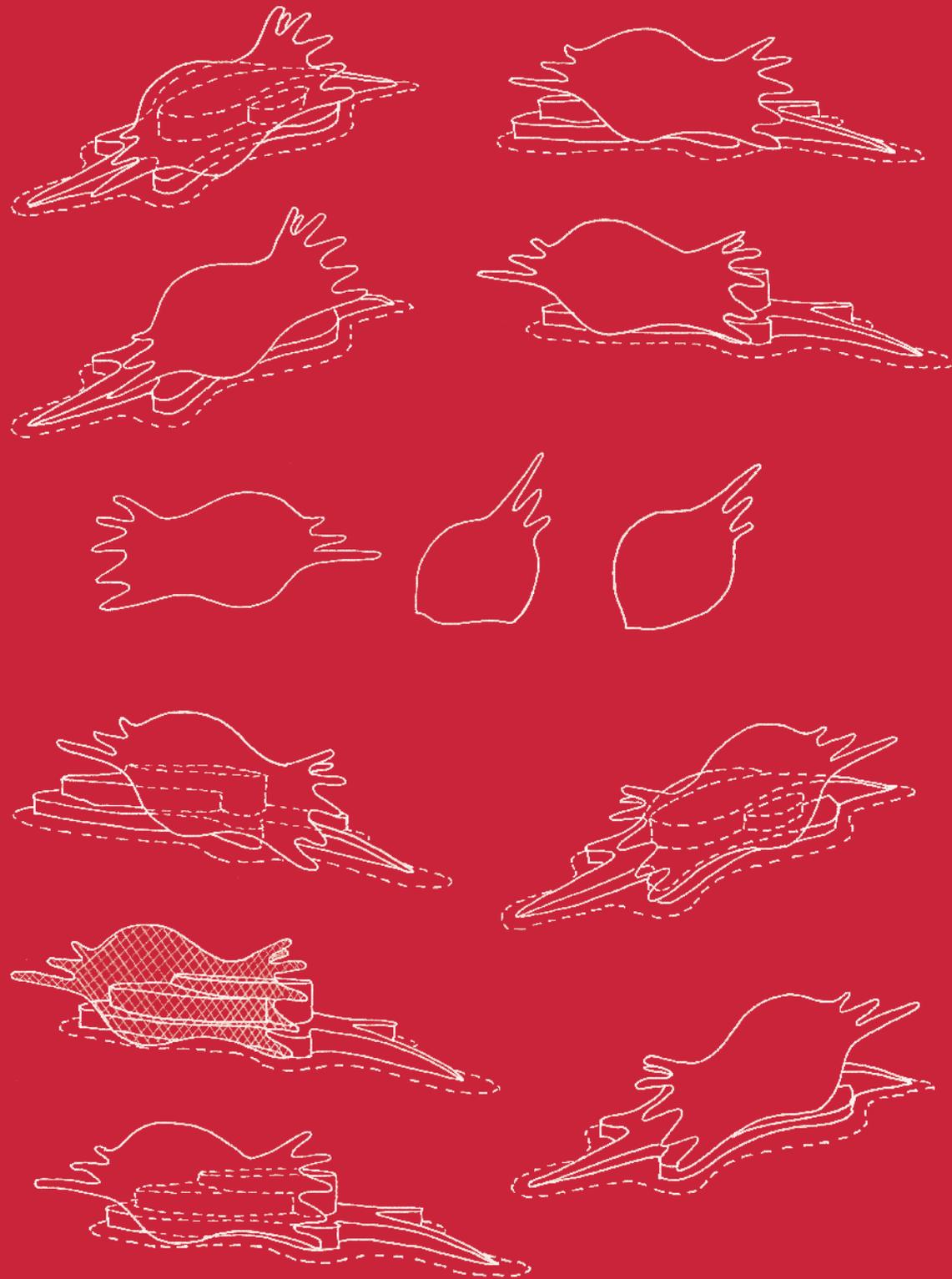


aries between landscape and building are merged to create a variety of inhabitable places for organized or *ad hoc* events: public and intimate, large or small. The former brick structure has been clad in metal frames, mesh, and glass, and reflected in pools of water. The suggestions are by no means definitive, but move the proposal into the materials and processes of construction, integrating the practical and utilitarian into a combination of old and new structures. These proposals test totipotent cellular differentiation as generative ideas in concept and material and extend Orta's temporary interventions into a more permanent architectural presence.

In Autumn 2013 TheGallery at Arts University Bournemouth exhibited a selection of Orta's *Totipotent Architecture* works. As part of this exhibition, further groups of students from different specialisms, including architecture, textile, model making, and fine art, respond once again to the work on view through collaborative making. Lucy + Jorge Orta provide a vital precedent for contemporary practice that demands and deserves our attention.

—
Simon Beeson, Course Leader, BA (Hons) Architecture
Professor Stephanie James, Head of the School of Visual Arts





FRANCESCA COMISSO

Totipotent Architecture Atoll

I hope the research we conduct will amplify a power to communicate, negotiating social bonds and uniting members of a community.

Lucy + Jorge Orta

Potential Architecture

A large, inhabitable sculpture with a cellular organic form rises from the grass of the Corso Tazzoli public park facing the Fiat Mirafiori car manufacturing plant in Turin.

This is a meeting place, the realization of a wish made by a group of "patrons," in this case students from two neighborhood schools. An "atoll," a "kind of free port," in their words. Lucy + Jorge Orta propose *Totipotent Architecture*: beginning with a stem cell—the unit of unlimited potential that presides over the construction of an entire organism—the artists have created a metaphor of a space for social interaction that changes according to how it is used. This potential is illustrated by the imprints of the students' bodies: casts made in aluminum and then sunk into the sculpture's three cement steps. Hands, shoes, backs, and buttocks all make up a series of ghost figures on the surface, inviting whomever climbs onto the sculpture to take a position that encourages nearness and contact.

By the time it was inaugurated in spring 2007, the work had already become a household name in

Turin. Some called it the "armadillo," while to others it was known as the "iron mask," or the "spaceship." Each name derives from how the sculpture looks from a given point of view, a particular way of contemplating and imagining it. I like to perceive it as the result of an act of familiarity, of tension in identifying the places that take space away from apathy and make it part of a mental geography as a premise to the various forms of inhabiting.

Patronage for this work began in 2003 with a debate involving the student patrons and cultural mediators on how public space relates to young people; on the various forms of accessibility, belonging, and exclusion; and on the issues of visibility and safety. The patrons' answer was to create something different from what the neighborhood already had in terms of places for young people to meet. First and foremost this difference consisted of the idea of a "transversal" area that, instead of the functions of recreation, play, sport, and creativity, would offer potential to a community or to a tribe of users, a group of people who, by their actions time after time, could contribute to redefining its sense. Projected onto the scene of urban

life, marked as it is by far-reaching change and its transformation by the media into a constant state of alarm, was a call for a place of interrelating, far from any nostalgia for a lost community and aware of the risks of producing something closed and exclusive.

Entrusted with the project in 2004, Orta developed these issues with the patrons by listening and exchanging views—an approach that marks the procedural and participatory nature of all their projects, leading up to a sculpture that combines being a sculpture with being a device. A “monument” against the idea of standardization, rubber-massified stamping, or the formatting of behavior patterns in precodified ways, times, and places, but still an example of fluid architecture, which by its sinuosity of line can adapt to the many ways of social exchange and take shape with them as a catalyst for community practices. It is the never-ending process of communication and exchange that presides over how our body cells develop, their progressive specialization as individual vital functions. This provides the artists with the metaphorical scenario of a social organism that stems from the coming together of different entities, their creative energy, and cooperation among them. It is the first example of a public work in the *Totipotent Architecture* series, a cycle of works for which research into social architecture developed

from the *Refuge Wear* series (1992–1998)—mobile, temporary architectures that envelop and protect the body—and *Nexus Architecture* (from 1993)—connective systems ranging from the individual to the broader context of the socio-urban context.

The house is the body

Refuge Wear, Body Architecture, Modular Architecture, Nexus Architecture, Totipotent Architecture. In the progressive augmentation of scale, from apparel to architecture to urban planning, from singularity to plurality, the body is the constant, indispensable yardstick for redefining the relationship between the individual and his or her surroundings from the standpoint of measuring artistic practice against the most burning social, humanitarian, and environmental issues that afflict the global reality of this late-modern age.

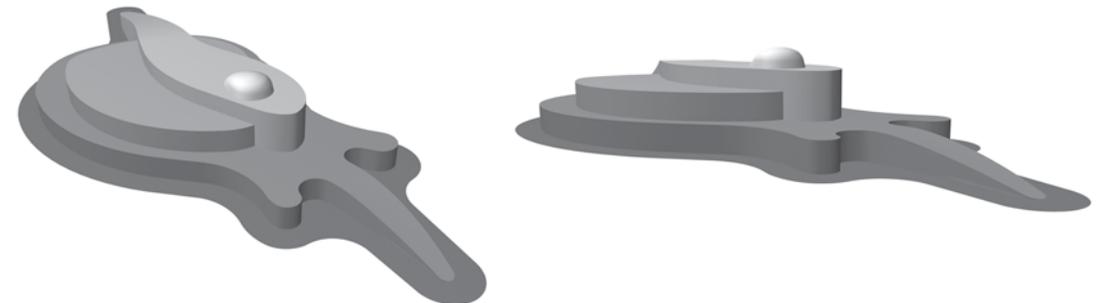
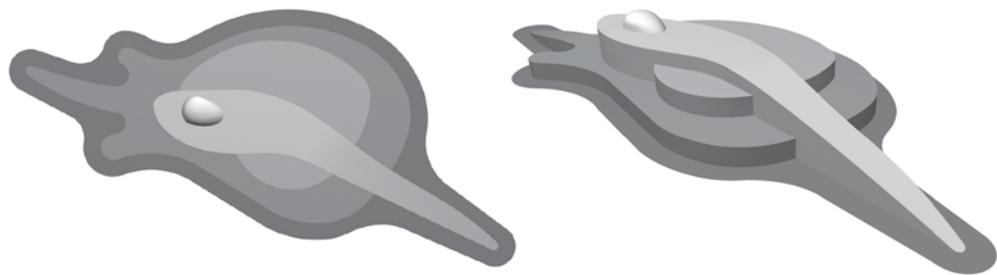
Heidegger’s assumption “man is insofar as he dwells” can be interpreted as a natural right that needs a place to manifest itself, not merely the occupation of a territory.¹ Orta returns our attention to this fundamental right of the subject that is both biological and political, beginning with the plight of the homeless, the refugees, the outcasts—those who have lost the link to a territory and the sense of belonging to it. The home shrinks, it clings to the body like a second skin. A costume-refuge that reclaims space, opening

up to be a tent, shifting the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, and—in the multiple or modular declination of single living units—placing the individual in coexistence with the collective—the personal and the shared (*Body Architecture, Modular Architecture*). The high-tech fabrics and the visually strong design in this and the later series work as a screen and interface to protect the body from the environment; they provide a refuge, they are home and indicators of a presence. Interwoven with symbols, images, and phrases, and conceived in cooperation with their intended beneficiaries, they enhance the communicative power, providing the frame within which the individual narratives can manifest. “Me, I’ve got a lot to say,” said one of the participants during one of the first workshops run by the artists. This has become the paradigmatic opening line of a speech that blends philosophical, scientific, and political thought with common language and, through being visible, takes on a new assertive force. A visibility that Lucy + Jorge Orta extend to the whole social body by means of the connective systems of *Nexus Architecture*.

Beginning with the repetition of every acquired custom and idea brought on by states of crisis or emergency—a sign of today’s reality and a resounding manifestation of the common conditions of town living, such as isolation, the feeling of social

distance, and rootlessness—the artists supply an essential interpretation of the concept of home, no longer a defined place in space but the existential condition of being in space, now only mediated by the body and by how it relates to other human beings. From the suit of clothes to the tent, to the temporary village, the shift happens in the passage from the isolated individual to his binding himself to other pivotal individuals. The accessories to this link function as “doors and bridges” that enable people to unite and separate, making them simultaneously independent and interdependent.² Bodies congregate in living units (*Body Architecture*) or stretch through space, all linked together (*Nexus Architecture*). As Paul Virilio wrote on Lucy Orta’s practice, “at a time when we are told that men are free, emancipated, totally autonomous, she tells us that, on the contrary, there is a threat and that man is regrouping...the warmth of one gives warmth to the other. The physical link weaves a social link.”³

The constituent meaning of this relation can be traced back to the concept of “being a plural singular,” a concept formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy as a principle of co-essence that “has its very essence in the stroke, in the hyphen stroke which is also separator stroke, a stroke that divides.” According to Nancy, from Rousseau to Nietzsche, from Marx to Heidegger, “the investigation into being arrives at ‘we are’ as a way of expressing the being that



overturns the meaning and the syntax of ontology turning it into a 'sociality.'" In this sense, "the combination of singulars is singularity 'itself'; it assembles the singulars only insofar as it spaces them, and 'links' them only insofar as it does not unify them."⁴ The nature of the Mirafiori Nord "atoll house" is in accord with this co-essence. From the *singular plural* dynamics that tell of its destiny of being a place to meet, the totipotent social architecture encompasses many of the issues that we have already looked into: protection, visibility, identity, and, above, all utopia.

Totipotent Architecture - Atoll responds to a request for visibility and quality aesthetics. It "marks" the surroundings and helps to redesign them by the language of art. It works like a "presence marker" in a neighborhood that typifies urban periphery, a frame for the new narratives by which each and every person can tell his or her story and see each other beyond the stereotypes by which they are talked about and looked at. In the *Atoll* identity is played out on various levels and in a variety of forms. As we have said, the sculpture is a frame and a stage for the people of the neighborhood, especially the young who attend school or live in the council houses at the edge of the park. Despite being a roomy organism and sensitive to use, the *Atoll* does not set out to be virgin territory. Its surface is "historicized" by traces: forms of seated or reclining bodies, alone or set alongside one another, nearby or brushing each other, turned to face the houses, the sky, or the flow of cars beyond the curtain of trees. The imprint of the bodies gives an indicative sign, a clue; Lucy+ Jorge Orta responded to the patrons' wish to leave their signature, record a role, a commitment, and a feeling of pride in its outcome. The artists' proposal is the result of the quest for an alternative to the name as a means of expressing identity. Entrusted to the body imprint, the "signature" becomes sensitive to its changes over time—the body grows and gets old, clothes change with fashions and as the demands of self-representation change. The mold allows identity to emerge like a territory open and

undergoing transformation, beginning with its unshakeable unity. The imprint, however, is also a void, a shape to be filled by gestures—those of children who use them to play-cook stews of grass, leaves, and nuts that have fallen from the trees, and those who are prompted in play by the positions and lower themselves into the intimacy of someone else's body.

The empty clothes installed in the exhibition spaces, the unpopulated tents and villages, and the uninhabited atoll are all metaphors for an ideal community, a timeless, placeless dream, both poetic and melancholic. However by treating the object work as prototypes and the sculptures as architecture, the artists open a functional, accessible presence ready for use around them. Lucy Orta speaks of "Functional Utopia," a theoretical operative declination of the return to utopias with which Jorge Orta drafted his *Manifesto for the Third Millennium* in 1994.^{5/6} A possibility of being which they "set up" through urban initiatives and performances, and even beforehand in the spirit of cooperation and coauthoring that they adopt in all their projects with workshops, discussion forums, and with the contemporary contribution of a variety of social and professional actors (from local government to schoolchildren, the world of academia, and scientific and technological research, to shelters for the homeless, émigré families, and the inhabitants of an entire village).

The live presence of bodies that move united with each other (*Nexus*) or adjacent when not enveloped in a single structure lined up in formations (*Connector*) ooze a "constituent" power or, in the words of activism, given as visualizations of empowerment make an ideal space real. Rather than offering answers to the problems of our society, Orta's work raises issues and opens debate extending it to the greatest number of people. Instead of an instruction booklet the artists leave clues like the imprints in the *Atoll*, archaeological remains pointing to the future, both an inner place for the self and a way of inhabiting the world.

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1. Martin Heidegger, "Costruire, abitare, pensare (1954)," in *L'urbanisme. Utopies et réalités*, ed. Françoise Choay (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965).
2. Echoing George Simmel's thoughts on human beings Andrew Patrizio brings his concept of "door and bridge" to recorded representation in Lucy Orta's work. See Andrew Patrizio, "Bridges and doors: some thoughts on Lucy Orta's connector project," in *Liquid Architecture / Moving Architecture: Lucy Orta*, eds. Lucy Orta and Courtney Smith (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2003) and *Lucy Orta Body Architecture* (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2003).
3. Paul Virilio, *Lucy Orta: Refuge Wear* (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996).
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996).
5. Jade Dellinger, "Conversations, 2001-2003," in *Lucy Orta: Body Architecture* (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber).
6. Jorge Orta, "The Return of the Utopias: The Aesthetics of Ethics, a Draft Manifesto for the Third Millennium (November 1994)," in *Light Messenger: XLVI Venice Biennale* (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1995).

