

Body Boundaries

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In both *Nexus Architecture* and *Emotive Nexus*, Orta challenges the conventions of largely western understandings of the body, identity and clothing. In doing so, she calls upon us to think about the body as the critical location of our connections and the expression of our sociality.

What makes *Nexus* clothing so resonant is the way in which our boundaries are breached and the usual differences and distances between physically bounded bodies overcome. This touches on basic, strongly held notions of the body and identity. Body limitations have resonance for all cultures, and the management of these borders are expressive - symbolic - of concerns about the social boundaries of the group. For the anthropologist Mary Douglas, the boundaries drawn around bodies in different cultures are symbolic of the boundaries the group wants to draw around itself. In the west, clothing performs the function of demarcating clear body limits and expresses, at a deep level, the cherished idea of the individual as the bedrock of social and political life. The individual -as- body is so much a part of western culture that to challenge this, as Orta does with *Nexus*, constitutes a political intervention. What happens when these interventions travel, as they do to many parts of the globe, is the translation of these ideas within the local setting: the meanings of *Nexus* clothing in western locations will, inevitably, be read differently in South Africa or, indeed, in Cuba. Location thus informs the meanings and readings we might make.

However, whether it be in South Africa, Cuba or London, in her use of clothing, Orta harnesses a very powerful medium. Clothing and fashion, in different ways, tend to create and reproduce social differences, to establish and maintain the appearance of different sorts of bodies. Whereas clothing usually demarcates clearly delineated social differences, such as gender, 'race', ethnicity, religion, fashion generally proclaims to express 'individuality', although here too, fashions are, by and large, collective - fashion today referring to popular styles of clothing worn by the many not the few. Indeed, fashion treads a thin line between two contradictory tendencies, as the sociologist Georg Simmel suggests, that between conformity/similarity and differentiation/individuality. This reaches an apotheosis in modern urban life. The city is a 'stage' for individuality and clothing the 'armour' for managing the stares or glances of strangers we encounter, a mobile environment within which the individual body may seek to differentiate itself.

However, in Orta's work, these common sense understandings of clothes as markers of social/group differences or manifestations of individual pseudo-differences are challenged. Instead, clothing becomes the medium through which social links and bonds are made manifest, both literally and metaphorically, through the links of zippers and channels, while the uniformity of the garments - workers' overalls - create androgynous shapes that defy classification by the usual social markers and attempt to give form to the social, not the individual body. Instead of differences, we are offered a powerful vision of possible, momentary collectives or networks of being whose connections are rendered visible and visceral in time and space.

In *Nexus Architecture*, this emphasis on the social body is greatest. In *Emotional Nexus*, Orta sets out to explore the dimensions of creative expression and modification within the same basic block or garment structure. Here designers' emotional responses and feelings are given expression and allowed to develop through the design of the garment while still aiming to preserve the collective integrity of the *Nexus* metaphor. This represents an interesting extension of her work and one that holds out the possibility of articulating the basic tension between individual and social sphere.

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