

Self Help

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If language and art exist, it is because « the other » exists. it is true that we speak to ourselves in a constant soliloquy, but we do so through the medium of a common speech... G. Steiner

Lucy Orta's entire work concerns this « other »: This other which society has placed on the periphery ; this other which can become itself ; this other in which we are all found, and which is excluded from the *Teatrum Mundi*, the characteristic daily humdrum of sociality. This other is cloistered, deprived of role and function.

Born at the end of the eighties, during a period of economic crisis, the work of Lucy Orta is defined with respect to this situation of unparalleled difficulty and exclusion, in the hell of the modern spiral. Today's world is marked by an extreme fragility and precariousness. No one can be spared. The fall, with no safety net at the bottom, can be a long one or can follow a swallow dive trajectory. Deprived of work, money, shelter, the third world is gradually invading the major capitals. Survival is the new slogan of the decade.

By involving individuals in difficulty, whether isolated or as part of a group, and encouraging them to participate in collective actions consisting notably of producing *Refuge Wear* or *Survival Kits*, the artist clearly raises the question of the citizen, underlining his role as a part of the whole.

To be a citizen is to participate in society, even if in France a tradition of sharing social responsibilities does not really exist. Lucy Orta has developed an atypical attitude in the French artistic milieu, which is not normally given to social or political commitment.

Neither sociologist nor moralist, her work should be seen as part of a philosophy confronting the reality of today's world - it is art as a form of commitment. She asserts the necessity for the artist to have a stake in forming part of the daily landscape. Lucy Orta recalls that aesthetics is a form of shared experience. Far from being solutions, her proposals are « outlines » of responses to human distress and to an unsuitable social environment. Like street theatre which is becoming increasingly popular in disadvantaged areas, her collective actions are geared mainly towards bestowing a role as player and spectator on all of those who have lost their bearings in the social scene, all those who, whether willingly or unwillingly, find themselves on the margins. Locked into their exclusion, the aim is not to have them lose themselves in a collective subject but to rediscover, via the strength of the group, the spatial organisation of society. In this « do it yourself » era, survival is rediscovered, albeit in kit form. However, Lucy Orta's survival kits and collective actions point, not to a user manual type survival, or to the morality of aid, or to a claim to offer solutions but to a « self help »

strategy; experiences and problems shared through listening and participation. Everybody for himself, together!

However, these collective actions do not entail a process of homogenisation or ghettoization. On the contrary, Lucy Orta's garments or accessories can be converted according to need, necessity or urgency. Her Refuge Wear serves as both mobile clothing and temporary shelters. The identity of this refuge wear is always modular, adaptable according to the needs of the moment. Street Wear: « a street range » - drawn from the title of one of the artist's works (« a bag for the street ») produced in 1995 for the Tati chain stores, could be a generic name for all her work. Street culture does not only belong to the disadvantaged; it encompasses all colours and is aimed at everyone. It is the only popular culture shared by the largest number of people and it even has its chic areas. Non-hegemonic, it is purely « democratic ».

The street is where everything starts and to where everything returns. It is a primary or secondary residence, a land of rummaging or survival. Synonymous of an era when objects have an increasingly short lifespan, when a tide of objects is rejected on the shores of the consumer society, when recycling, the art of accommodating remnants, seems to be a symptom of current society and culture. As noted by Gilles Lipovetsky « ... it is on the streets of Paris or at the flea market, in the unexpected corners of daily life, that the most worrying signs are to be found. Art and life are here and now ».

It was in this context that, over a period of four months in 1995, Lucy teamed up with the residents of the Salvation Army to organise a sewing workshop, or rather a « second-hand clothes transformation » workshop where stocks of old clothes were recycled in order to create new and original garments for each of the resident-participants who often have no other choice but to salvage old and worn second-hand clothing. It was not a case of make-do-and-mend ready-to-wear, but tailor-made garments adapted and defined by and for each participant. The artist develops her work around the concept of identity, one of the major problems resulting from exclusion. The aim is to give people caught up in the system the means to obtain a new dignity, as the image one has of oneself begins with what one wears. These items were presented in the form of a public performance in the 13th district of Paris, at the Salvation Army Refuge constructed by Le Corbusier. The articles on show included a blouse made of stockings and a skirt made from old belts sewn together. Students from a suburban secondary school modelled the clothes. A new life, a new pride was given to objects earmarked for disposal: a sort of regeneration, just like our clothes, as a second skin, each day reactivates our appearance and our role in society.

For Lucy Orta, to speak of clothes is to speak of a consciousness of nudity, an awareness of the self. Clothes are not external attributes or strangers to the nature of the wearer; they express his or her essential and fundamental reality. Her Refuge Wear openly manifests man's procedures of space definition, that is to say, how he produces his spatial condition. In this way, as underlined by Daniel Sibony, « to inhabit a space is to assimilate it to a body ». The body is a building, and society too has a spatial morphology. Refuge Wear, being a necessary

element of an individual's need for a minimum personal space, allows the wearer to isolate himself from the world and create a place of reflection and meditation; a closed, four-dimensional universe. It is similar to a mountain refuge, that is to say a temporary shelter providing a basic comfort where he can stop off before continuing on his way. Refuge Wear can help him rebuild an inner strength and, like any house, allows him to plant his axis mundi. The artist developed her Refuge Wear in conjunction with certain homeless people whose paths she had followed over a number of years. The aim of the Refuge Wear is to serve as articles of reflection, made more poignant as some of the homeless have since succeeded in reintegrating into society. Unlike the committed political artists of the sixties, Lucy Orta prefers to confine herself to the world of art rather than seeking to denounce the « deficit-generating » systems in society. She confronts reality face to face; a reality that she herself has summoned by acting on the very terrain of these actions. The result takes bodily form and is shown on the terrain with its protagonists: the art of the terrain. With an eye for consistency, Lucy Orta is one of those rare artists who tackle the world using its own resources. The artist seeks to make each work part of a collective project that branches out and gradually becomes part of the world's mass production process. Lucy Orta prefers to regard the unique object as a prototype; a prototype which will allow access to mass production and mass distribution.