

# UNION



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# Lucy Orta on Architecture, Art & Activism

Artist Studio Orta  
Interview Rachel Weinberg

British artist Lucy Orta (b. 1966) starts this conversation discussing her architectural-leaning series, *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture*, created with her partner Jorge Orta between 1992 and 2014 as part of their collective, Studio Orta. In *Refuge Wear*, Orta fashions mobile, temporary architectures that envelop and protect the body, resembling a tent or sleeping bag. One of the first pieces in this series, titled *Habitent* (1992–93), comprises a silver dome tent with two front pockets and a central zipper that connects the structure’s ‘body’ to a head-like form at its apex. In *Nexus Architecture*, Orta develops connective systems through a progressive augmentation of fabric and material that relate to the individual and broader context of socio-urbanism. In a 2001 staging of *Nexus Architecture* at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst Köln, 35 ‘bodies’ in a 5x7 metre grid were suspended from the ceiling like Halloween ghosts, joined by fabric extensions that appear as additional limbs. Paul Virilio, whom Orta references in this conversation, describes the work more clearly: “Each individual keeps an eye on, and protects, the other. One individual’s life depends on the life of the other. In Lucy’s work, the warmth of one gives warmth to the other. The physical link weaves a social link.” Orta continues to explore these ‘links’ into the 2000s and 2020s with extended series such as *The Meal*

(1997–2024), *Amazonia* (2009–24) and *Antarctica* (2006–22), the latter which was partially staged in Antarctica as part of the End of the World Biennial in 2007. These projects grow out of Orta’s interest in clothing (she studied fashion design and worked at couture houses in Paris), the environment (influenced by her mother’s anti-nuclear and anti-demolition activism), politics, habitat, the body, mobility and human relationships.

In 2000, Lucy and Jorge established Studio Orta Les Moulins, a complex of four former industrial buildings located along an eight-kilometre stretch of the Grand Morin River valley. The complex includes Moulin Sainte-Marie (paper mill), Moulin de Boissy (pulp mill), Moulin la Vacherie (grain and cider mill) and La Laiterie (dairy). During the summer months, Lucy and Jorge reside at the studio alongside artists and practitioners who use the workshop and residency spaces. Lucy Orta was interviewed by phone not from Les Moulins, but her home in Paris. The conversation covers various topics, but centres on relationships, community and our human desire to belong. The tent bookends the discussion, becoming a symbol for the containment of ideas, performance, learnings and safety. It becomes apparent that Orta repeatedly assembles and disassembles the tent as part of her ongoing pursuit of change.

**RACHEL WEINBERG** I'd like to start by asking how you define architecture. In your early projects *Modular Architecture* and *Nexus Architecture*, you use the term to set the parameters within which people coexist, relate and survive. These projects explore the possibilities of collective action and collaboration. How does the discipline of architecture relate to your practice?

**LUCY ORTA** Structurally, architecture can contain beings, both individual and collective. I'm interested in the habitation elements of architecture: how people inhabit their psychic space, their physical space, their body space – but also how they interact with people. In architecture, there are also special configurations that allow for communication, cohabitation and interaction. I remember, early on in my career, going to the Pompidou library after Jorge gave me some references to research. He told me to look at Yona Friedman. I was very inspired by his drawings, the little stickmen in movement and the interactions between them. I wanted the work I was creating to embody these modular, flexible structures. I originally explored that notion through clothing, reflecting on how the outer layer around the body could be expanded into modular membranes of connection and communication. So textiles and how they operate in conjunction with the individual and the community are also important.

**RW** Your work has been described as wearable architecture. Does that phrase hold particular significance for you? Do your early textile works focus on the body inhabiting an architectural form?

**LO** Absolutely. It's very important in the *Refuge Wear* because I was very concerned about minimal habitable space. At some points, the fabric doesn't even touch the body,

but it is still a space which you can inhabit. I was also interested in *Refuge Wear's* modularity, its convertibility, if you like, its ability to become something else, like an item of clothing. Paul Virilio talks beautifully about layers around the body: the underwear, the dress, the coat, the tent, the container, the house, the building, et cetera, et cetera. *Refuge Wear* is an intermediary layer between the built environment, in terms of how we conceive it in bricks and mortar, and the bodily environment and how we can see that in textiles or membranes.

**RW** Architecture can also serve as a nexus for community.

**LO** Yes, community is the other modular element. The earlier work was based on the need for migrant populations to receive shelter and clothing. It was necessary to create something that was mobile, portable, wearable and protective from harsh conditions, to protect against severe meteorological elements. After these urgent safety considerations, it became increasingly important to reflect on the community bonds fractured by displacement and other factors. The family unit is breaking down alongside relationships between communities.

In *Refuge Wear*, there's a natural progression from individual to more collective structures, although still in a confined space next to somebody, such as *Body Architecture*. The work becomes more expansive as the structures become bigger. An individual unit can connect to a module, like a docking bay, and expand through the multi-connections, multi-possibilities that *Connector* and *Modular Architecture* structures allowed.

I did some experiments with contemporary dance and questioned how we could reconstruct architectural spaces. How can we build them together? What does it mean if you're an individual, and what are your relationships to others when



Top: Lucy and Jorge Orta, *Body Architecture* – Foyer D, 2002, Dome: aluminium coated polyester, 3 telescopic aluminium armatures; 6 Units: Clerprem Solden lycra, various fabrics, silkscreen print, zippers, 6 armatures, 510x510x190cm. ©Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP, Paris 2024 Photo: JJ Crance

Bottom: Lucy and Jorge Orta, *Modular Architecture* – *The Unit* x 10, 2002, aluminium coated polyester, reversible Solden Lycra, open cell polyurethane, silkscreen print, zips, armatures (co-creation workshop with the Lycée de la Mode Cholet), 350x400x50cm. ©Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP, Paris 2024 Photo: JJ Crance

Previous page: Lucy and Jorge Orta, *Refuge Wear* Intervention London East End 1998, 1998, Lambda photograph, laminated on Dibond (edition 1/7), 170x120cm. ©Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP, Paris 2024. Photo: John Akehurst



Lucy and Jorge Orta, *Nexus Architecture x 50 Intervention Köln*, 2001, original Lambda colour photograph, laminated (edition 7), 150x120cm (framed 157x127cm). ©Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP, Paris 2024  
Photo: Peter Guenzel

you're outside a space that confides in its attachment or in its physical atmosphere. This is the premise of *Nexus Architecture*, too, although it's slightly different because the form resembles clothing rather than a tent. All in all, I think Jorge and I are interested in manifestations of the collective body in public space: how the audience perceives a collective body or a community walking down the street, reconfiguring or disassembling or reassembling.

**RW** Your descriptions are intellectual, rational and in some ways, academic, almost like a research project.

**LO** It's interesting, in my role as Professor at University of the Arts London (UAL), I'm supervising PhD students. I've come to understand this process as 'research through making'. Unless the work is tested, I can't imagine what the next scenario will be. It has to have some shape or form that renders the concept visible and tangible. The important thing is that it exists, and it operates as a sort of 'prototype' that allows that thinking process to rest and rebuild. Making through research has to occur, otherwise, you don't have anything to test or discuss with others.

For *Nexus Architecture*, there has been a huge range of people involved. Contemporary fine art can be quite elitist, so it was important that we broke down audience or participation barriers, or at least the perceived barriers. Particularly in Paris, there was still a very elitist mindset, which I was totally against. Initially, I was up against a lot of criticism. And the more criticism that came, the more motivated I felt, and the more important it became to be active and participate in society.

**RW** Your art practice is part of a humanitarian discipline, but your research and execution are part of a sociological or scientific

**one. Do these two disciplines ever conflict?**

**LO** I think they become part and parcel. The topics I am exploring are not to be approached with a light touch. I am exploring really emotional and traumatic situations. It's not possible to just slide over the surface.

**RW** How have you engaged with research in your recent *Amazonia* project? What results have been produced, if any?

**LO** I don't think we've come to results yet because the project is still nascent. A lot of projects are long term. This project started as an invitation by the Natural History Museum, who were interested in our project *OrtaWater*. There's a hidden river under the museum in London. For the most part, people don't know that they're walking on water. It's beautiful. There are these invisible rivers through many cities around the world. Apparently there are more than ten hidden in London.

Through the project, we had the opportunity to work closely with scientists, learn about their research processes and protocols, and gain valuable insights into their work. We wanted to show the positive stories of discovery, of the scientists' community, and not just the negative aspects of climate change or species loss we hear about constantly in the media. By bringing pockets of knowledge to new audiences, we can begin to change attitudes and raise awareness.

**RW** You always seem to identify a link between the state of the world and the arts. Are you making work in response to the world or as a means of aiding it?

**LO** Before there was very limited access to the breadth of knowledge we have today – through social media, through the internet. At Studio Orta we tended to be ahead of problems because we could see that they were being talked about

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Lucy and Jorge Orta, *Antarctic Village - No Borders*, 2007, ephemeral installation across the Antarctic Peninsula, dimensions variable.  
©Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP, Paris 2024  
Photo: Thierry Bal

in scientific journals or in other professional forums that the public could not access. We were interested in exploring how art could be a medium through which we could gain the public's attention. I guess that is, in a sense, advocacy. Now, the whole landscape has changed because we have access to so much in real time – knowledge is no longer confined to the specialist. We know more about storms destroying homes, about forest fires, about ocean pollution, about droughts – climate change science is in the news all the time. People are more aware of the tangible evidence today than ever before.

**RW Do you feel pressured to provide artistic solutions?**

**LO** No, because we are all in it together. I work in a university and I am an artist and therefore always thinking about future possibilities, how everyone's insights and knowledge can contribute. It's really exciting.

**RW I only ask because big ideas can sometimes seem too big to achieve.**

**LO** Yes, but we try to break them down into bite-sized pieces. It's not

possible to do things on an individual scale. I'm constantly thinking, well, if I want to achieve something tangible, then I need to gather these insights, this person, this specialist, et cetera, in order to create a critical mass that allows us to at least start the motion of getting to where we want to go. I've learnt a lot by working with large non-governmental organisations, particularly with migration NGO's policymakers and lawyers. The challenges they face are humongous. Processes can take at least ten years of development to achieve an incremental outcome. That's the goal we set ourselves. We won't get results now. They may be ten, fifteen, twenty years from now.

**RW You mentioned needing other people to get a project off the ground. Many people are involved in your practice – craftspeople with generations of experience working with tents, various communities, botanists, climate scientists, water engineers. Would you say you have a strong desire and openness to collaborate, shifting**

**attention from yourself to focus on something larger?**

**LO** Yes, precisely. I take the work out of myself, my personal sphere, because it is collective. The issues are important to everybody. There's no place for egos today. It's the common project or shared goal that is important.

**RW Your approach of allowing the work to exist independently, embodying something beyond yourself, brings to mind Land artists like Robert Smithson or Nancy Holt, who created works meant to stand on their own – *Spiral Jetty*, for instance.**

**Do you feel a connection to the term 'artist'?**

**LO** Yes, these artists paved the way drawing attention to the landscape. We are not Land artists, we see ourselves as artists-builders, catalysers and mediators. Studio Orta is 100% an artistic practice, and there's no doubt about that. But our practice is building on and suggesting new forms of expression to draw attention to the challenges ahead. Social Sculpture, proposed by Joseph Beuys, also stems from the questions artists were asking

in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by activist expressions in the 1980s. We're totally dedicated to art and we are concerned with prompting imaginative thinking to build a new world. Jorge is nearing 75, me 60. We are worried, we've got ten years left. What can we do in those ten years? Perhaps we live longer, but we are aware of our physical limitations, so we need to be as active and as catalysed as possible.

**RW Where did this altruistic motivation come from?**

**LO** My mother was very socially engaged, a social worker and activist, and Jorge was exposed to the extreme conditions living under a dictatorial regime, so it's in our DNA.

**RW If you had the power to change one thing immediately, what would be your first priority?**

**LO** I would provide more access to creative education. As well as developing imagination, I think that creativity can be a respite. It can also be a fusion, it can also be a pastime, it could also be a practice of wellbeing. I really believe in applied learning to

encourage knowledge sharing for future thinking.

**RW Do you think creativity has trickled down in the university system?**

**LO** In the UK, arts is being erased from the curriculum. It's heartbreaking. It's absolutely horrific. We're fighting against that all the time. We need to be demonstrating the importance of arts and the value of art to society. At UAL, I undertake qualitative analysis to demonstrate the importance of art education, art activities, both personal wellbeing and of benefit to the community more widely.

**RW What projects are you working on at the moment?**

**LO** I recently returned from the 2014 Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale in Saudi Arabia. It was my first extended time in the Middle East and a very interesting and very exciting experience. The contemporary art scene is burgeoning. Universities and art schools are being built, there is a huge investment in tourism, cultural heritage and the crafts. I met some incredible and inspiring women leaders, teachers, artisans, educators, artists, botanists, chefs. My preconceived idea of the country has shifted.

Experiencing the desert climate and working with the creative community and scientists has encouraged us to think about the need to become more resilient to climate, to develop more adaptational capacities. We will explore this in metaphorical terms and we will reveal new artworks at the 2025 British Textile Biennial, in a retrospective exhibition.

**RW Does this work incorporate the same flora and fauna motifs in the Amazonia series, or are you expanding on something else?**

**LO** Expanding on something else. I'm actually going back to architecture. I'm working on a Bedouin tent as a site of learning. I'm thinking about the tent in terms of its flexibility and its capacity to house communities in extreme conditions. I'm looking at the relationship between the habitat and the extreme environment and addressing nomadic lifestyles and displacement according to climate changes.

**RW The tent also relates to movement and transition.**

**People uplift and uproot the tent in response to different environments and contexts.**

**I am thinking, for instance, of the Bedouin communities and how they settle and unsettle. For them, architecture is an unfixd form.**

**LO** Exactly. And that takes it back to the earlier work, the mobile refuge as in *Refuge Wear*, *Body Architecture*, *Connector* and *Body Architecture*.

**RW The tent is also a universal object. It's everywhere and it has multiple uses. There's also something interesting about the physical and emotional safety of the tent.**

**LO** Safety is an interesting word. I found safety is a way of building a safe space, an embodied space cohabited by the body. What's really fascinating is a tent 'membrane' provides and internal space for intimacy, a soft textile membrane, which can make bodies feel protected, safer. **U**

Lucy and Jorge Orta,  
*Connector Mobile Village IX, Cholet, 2002*  
Photo: JJ Crance  
All images © Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP, Paris 2024



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