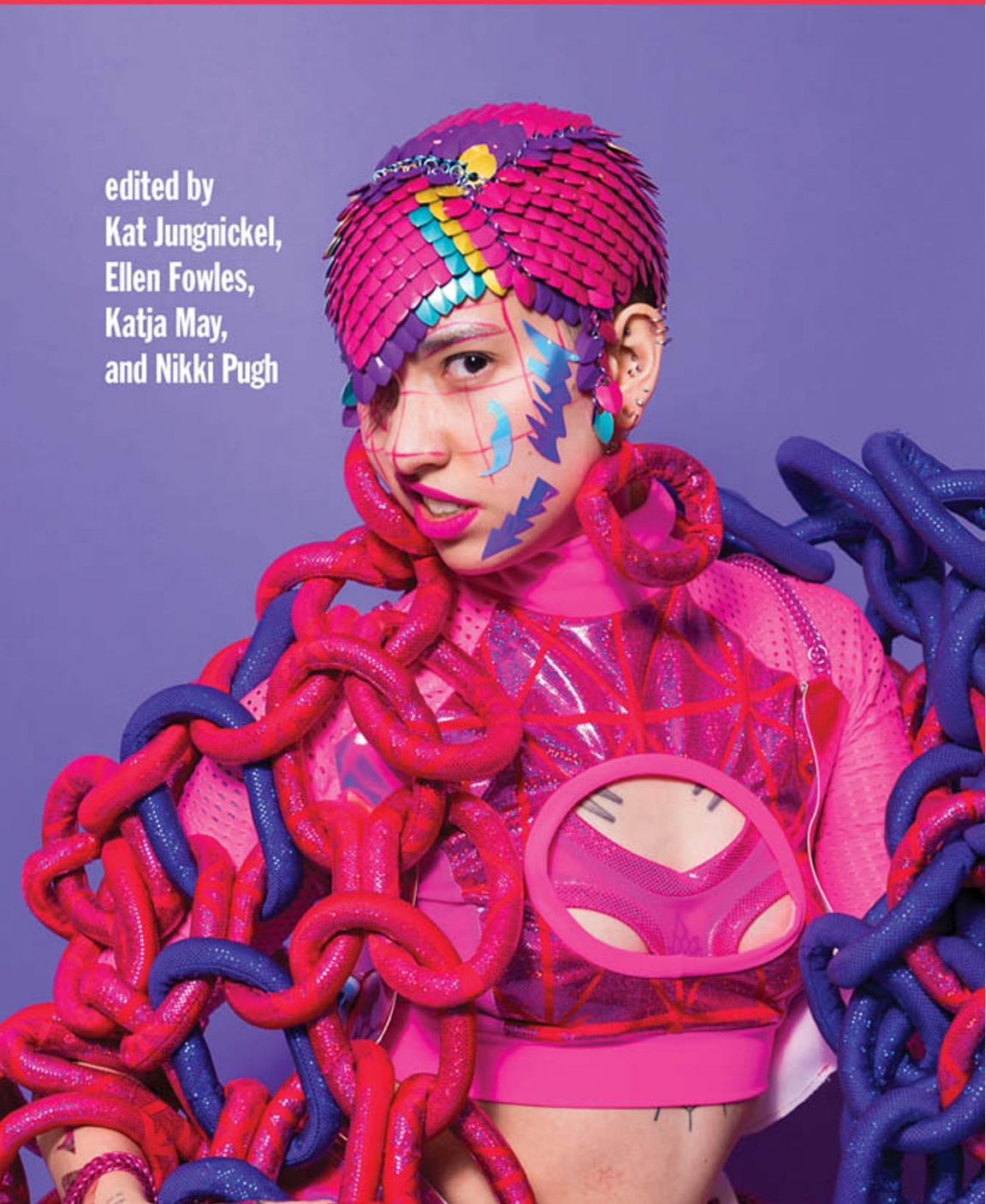
Wearable Utopias

Imagining, Inventing, and Inhabiting New Worlds

edited by
Kat Jungnickel,
Ellen Fowles,
Katja May,
and Nikki Pugh



WEARABLE UTOPIAS

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This chapter is about wearables that connect individuals and wider communities to important social and political ideas. From the turn of the last century, when women's rights campaigners took to Britain's streets to campaign for the right to vote, to more recent accounts of high-profile American basketball players wearing "I can't breathe" T-shirts to protest the murder of George Floyd, or environmental protesters all over the world covered in Extinction Rebellion time-running-out hourglass prints, wearables have helped people claim new forms of civic expression and render visible a wide range of inequities. Sociologist Diane Crane argues that while "histories of fashionable clothing" give the impression of consensus and conformity, a close look at clothing on the fringes of society reveals "social tensions that are pushing widely accepted conceptions of social roles in new directions."[1] So, while some wearables have historically helped those in power enforce social and physical restrictions, many have also served as emancipatory tools for people who have been denied space, voice, and rights.

Not all wearable connections are related to protest, but wearables are particularly powerful when mobilized as collective social action. Writing about the suffragettes of the early twentieth century, Wendy Parkins describes how covering their bodies in "an epidemic of purple, white and green forged a public identity for themselves in the public spaces of the city" and pushed their message "into the sphere of political communication."[2] Feminist scholar Lisa Tickner explains how these material actions were not just "a footnote or an illustration to the 'real' political history going on

elsewhere, but an integral part of the fabric of social conflict" complete with "its own power to shape thought, focus debates and stimulate action."[3]

A more recent example is provided by Clothing The Gaps, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-run company in Australia, that makes and sells "Not a Date to Celebrate" and "Always Was, Always Will Be" printed T-shirts. These slogans reference and reframe January 26, currently officially recognized as Australia Day,[4] as Invasion Day, a collective day of mourning. While they make "Mob Only" pieces, most of Clothing The Gaps' collection is "Ally Friendly" for supporters to "wear their values on their tee and spark conversations." They argue that it is through "shared values and a vision to use fashion as a vehicle for social change" that collective change is possible.[5] Similarly, writing about Extinction Rebellion, geographers Eleanor Johnson and Håvard Haarstad argue that protesters' use of imagery and text, in physical, and material form, and also online, "amplified public space." They explain, "These activists and cultural influencers, these counterpublics, leverage their bodies in space to forge a new moment of storytelling that challenges the status quo of mainstream climate policy."[6]

This chapter focuses on wearables made and worn by people to connect to each other and to larger issues. In particular, we focus on clothing that unites people under a common idea or movement. As Shahidha Bari writes, "In clothes, we are connected to other people, and other places in complicated and unyielding ways."[7] In these interviews, we explore how "items of dress—from the ceremonial to the everyday—can themselves become sites of political struggle" to "contest or legitimate the power of the state and the meanings of citizenship."[8]

Rather than just highlighting problems—such as failing systems, vulnerable people, and disasters—designers in this section also use wearables to reshape public narratives. They make connections between ideas and communities to convey alternative, more positive stories about immigration, refugees, asylum seekers, and women's power. Studying these kinds of shared practices, as Diane Crane writes, can "indicate shifts in social relationships and tensions between different social groups that present themselves in different ways in public space."[9] Here, practices of connecting, in terms of organizing people and linking them to ideas via things, are explored as citizenship in-the-making.

We start with a reworking of a classic protest visual. Millions of people taking to the streets to make their voices heard over a key issue is a familiar image from 1960s civil rights movements to present day antiwar protests. In 2016, America was on the brink of the Trump presidency when old footage of Trump making derogatory, misogynistic comments was widely recirculated. The distinctive pink two-eared ***Pussyhat***, with its mass appeal and wide-ranging inclusive events, challenged his narrative, reworking frustration and concerns about Trump's suitability for the role of president into a collective form of positive action that was highly visible on the streets and online. As **Krista Suh**, co-creator and co-founder of the *Pussyhat Project* explains, "A fun and successful part of the *Pussyhat* was because it was on the top of your head. When you gather together, it creates an aerial sea of pink." The fact that it was a handmade knitted hat was also central to its impact, as knitting and crocheting are often dismissed as soft feminized skills. "And yet," as Krista writes, "we know how powerful they are."

Another example that explores the extraordinary potential in everyday things is shared by artist and designer **Helen Storey**. ***Catalytic Clothing***, a collaborative project with chemist Tony Ryan, explored the use of clothing and textiles to purify air and tackle the urgent problem of air pollution, an issue so large that it can feel imposing for an individual to try and remedy. "Whether it's climate change, pollution, or poverty," explains Helen, "there are some problems in the world that are so huge we often find it very hard to find what part we can play." Helen and Tony responded by coating familiar, ubiquitous denim jeans in nanosized catalytic particles of titanium dioxide using specially designed washing detergent. When worn collectively, these garments break down harmful pollutants in the air. "There was something about this technology that brought all humans together. You realize that your one part is . . . really important. It started a conversation about what humans are capable of." Innovatively every single jeans-wearer could help clean the air for fellow citizens.

Issues around immigration and asylum-seeking have become increasingly weaponized around the world. Climate catastrophes, wars, impacts of colonization, and pollution are just some of the many reasons people choose—or are forced to—flee their homes. However, their arrival in, experiences of, and sense of connection to new places are often imbued with hostility

and fear. A unique perspective on the sociocultural importance of connecting across cultures and experiences is provided by **Dewi Cooke**, CEO of ***The Social Studio***. This not-for-profit social enterprise uses clothing and sewing skills to forge connections between more established Australian communities and newly arrived immigrant and asylum seekers. *The Social Studio* plays a critical role in mediating different communities, breaking down barriers, and raising awareness of the vast potential that diverse communities of people bring to Australian life. Dewi explains. "There's so much for us to learn from new arrivals and people who have made these journeys to come here. They bring with them skills and abilities and cultural knowledge and craft-based knowledge that we can all only benefit from." *The Social Studio* does this by celebrating the vibrancy, diversity, and joy of multiculturalism.

Strategies for connecting to place are central to **Lucy Orta's** remarkable practice, which spans decades of groundbreaking design. Working together with partner Jorge, Lucy has been collaborating with community groups to tackle critical social and political issues around the world. This process incorporates inclusive methods and collaborative creative practice to empower and connect people on the margins of society, such as asylum seekers and prison residents. Writing about the ***Modular Architecture*** project, Lucy explains the need "to connect people and to build communities out of nowhere . . . to give people the possibility of feeling part of a larger whole." Her work is about developing "a feeling that you are part of a larger community with a set of values that are shared. It's about citizenship and civic-ness. Once you have acquired a sense of place, belonging, community, there is potential for your voice to resonate."

Through these interviews, this chapter shows how equality is often fought for, defended, and performed in "collective and coordinated movement in public space."[10] While very different in subject and practice, these connective wearable acts share elements of openness and surprise. Interviewees didn't necessarily know what would happen when they created the conditions for connection by bringing communities together. As Donna Haraway writes, not everything can "be known in advance of engaging in the always messy projects of description, narration, intervention, inhabiting, conversing, exchanging and building."[11] What these wearables show is how small ideas can take shape, grow in scale, and impact how change can happen.

Refuge Wear and Nexus Architecture

Lucy Orta (she/her/hers)

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https://www.studio-orta.com

Lucy Orta is a renowned British visual artist committed to addressing individual body and community structures and their relation to key social and ecological challenges. Working in collaboration with her partner Jorge Orta under the banner of *Lucy + Jorge Orta*, she responds to political shifts, social inequality, and the climate emergency. A core theme of her international research concerns investigating migration and interwoven ecosystems through the medium of protective clothing apparel. Here Lucy generously shares insights from two bodies of work, *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture*, in which clothing is innovatively used as portable, modular, and autonomous survival enclosures, designed for collective well-being and community action.

Your creative work spans decades and covers a diverse range of topical subjects and outputs. How did wearables as a medium and subject matter first emerge in your practice?

While working in the fashion industry, I began making experimental clothing in response to the changing times. The first Gulf (Iraq) War broke out in the early 1990s, the consequences of which changed my trajectory. I gravitated away from fashion to reflect on clothing as a research practice. I started thinking about solutions to the humanitarian appeals for warm clothing and shelter for Iraqi and Kurdish refugees fleeing the war zones. The "clothes" I started drawing would become known as *Refuge Wear*.

The first response I made was the *Habitent*, a one-person tent with telescopic armatures that converted into a poncho. I drew on the knowledge I had of pattern cutting and the material properties of aluminum-coated fabric. I was interested in combining the different functionalities of basic human survival (by reflecting body heat from the surface membrane of the fabric), mobility (for migrant populations), and waterproofing (against adverse conditions and hardship). I saw the body as a fragile, vulnerable being that needed immediate and urgent protection. I didn't see *Refuge Wear* prototypes as clothing; they were a means of survival—something readily available, convertible, lightweight, mobile, and transformable. These

concepts led me to think about the issues affecting homelessness—the idea that clothing can become a temporary shelter and a shelter becomes clothing, which might also benefit people living on the streets. Clothing could become an emergency aid—a stop-gap solution to potentially save lives.

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Modular Architecture (1996) and *Connector Mobile Architecture* (2000) evolved out of *Refuge Wear*. These are individual bivouacs which connect via long zippers to form a communicative structure. These zips allowed for easy disconnection to avoid infringing on personal space. The modularity of these structures was an important concept, alongside the notion of flexibility. The sculptures needed to adapt to rapidly changing situations. They needed to

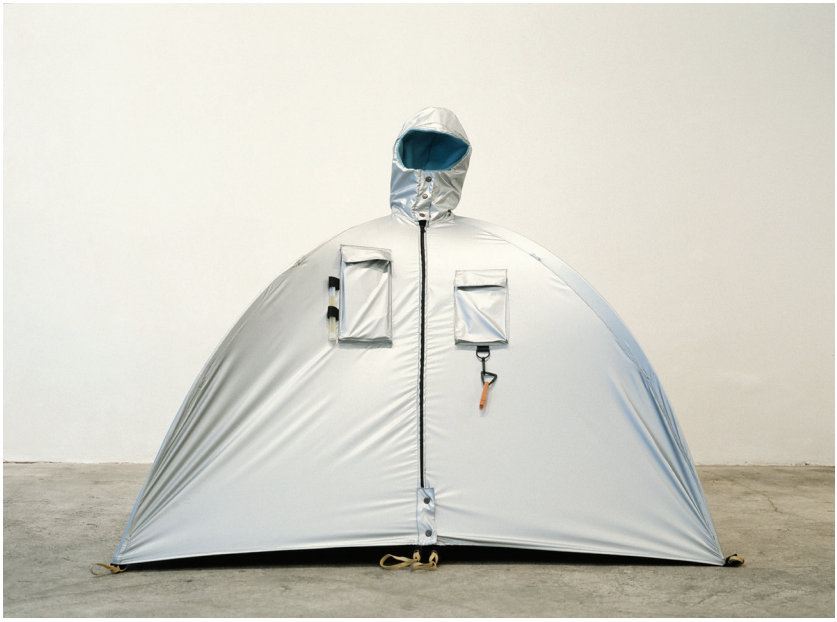

Figure 4.9
Refuge Wear–Habitent, 1992–1993.
Credit: Lucy + Jorge Orta / Photo: Pierre Leguillon

connect people and to build communities out of nowhere, to give people the possibility of feeling part of a larger whole.

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During the mid-'90s, I also started developing *Nexus Architecture*, exploring how clothing could tackle loneliness or indifference, or even bridge cultures by bringing people physically in contact with each other. Not just a few people, but hundreds at the same time and across continents.

After 2000, I began collaborating more closely with my partner, Jorge. Human survival and mobility remained constant subjects of our investigation. We also started working with broader societal problems such as lack of natural resources (water), environmental degradation, species loss; these became focal points for our practice.

Who are you imagining when you make your work?

While creating *Refuge Wear*, I began conversations with a group of formerly homeless people to test the survival concepts based on their experiences living on the streets. This was in conjunction with a residency that I undertook at the Salvation Army hostel in Paris in 1994. Listening and learning from them, I was able to design new functionalities according to their suggestions. But the work was never actually designed to be worn on an everyday basis; *Refuge Wear* and *Body Architecture* were experimental prototypes and they were presented in exhibitions as a public platform to engage a range of people in discussion and to draw attention to the failing social system. The attention they gained resonated with architects and designers who went on to develop functional industrial structures.

With *Nexus Architecture*, the premise of the work was to connect as many different groups of people as possible from around the world irrespective of gender, faith, color of skin, etc. A *Nexus Architecture* suit is quite simply a basic hooded worker's overall with a tube of fabric stitched on the back and front (the nexus), which connects a series of suits together via an open-ended zipper, creating an interlinked chain of wearers. This uniform item of

clothing became a nonhierarchical means to negotiate relationships between people and to experiment with ways people might cooperate as a connected group. The symbolic manifestation of all the connected people gives rise to a collective body—demonstrating our fundamental human interconnectedness and that one person's actions can have huge consequences for the whole group.

Through the public performances known as *Nexus Architecture Interventions*, over the span of several years, I could metaphorically connect a range of people across continents. I also physically brought people together through staging workshops. The workshops enabled the creation of new sets of contextual suits using textiles sourced locally. In Johannesburg, we sourced local Kangas,[16] and in Hangzhou, locally woven jacquard fabrics were donated to the workshops. We chose woodblock prints in India, and we silkscreen printed the fabric with symbols and messages relevant to the local communities we collaborated with. As the work gained a reputation,

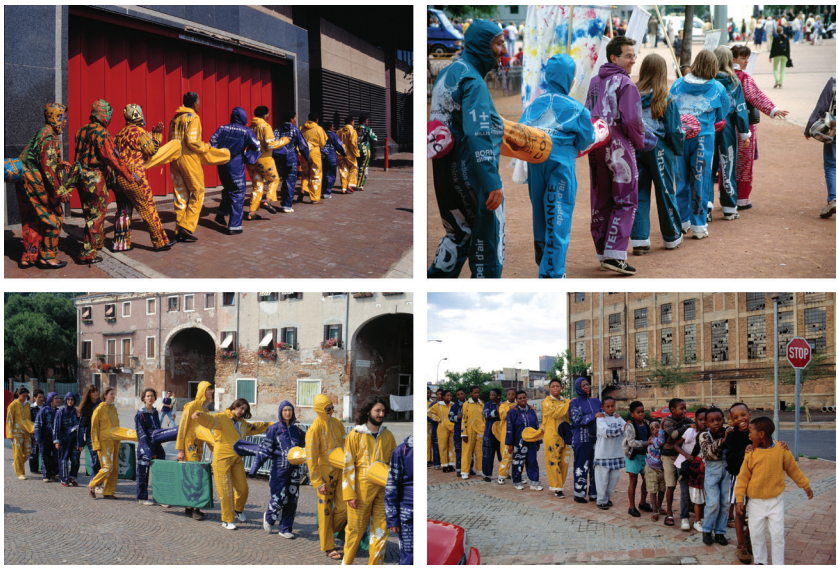

Figure 4.10
Nexus Architecture Interventions 1993–1998.
Credit: Lucy + Jorge Orta

groups who wanted to wear *Nexus Architecture* to manifest their opinions contacted me. I made a set of suits for teenagers living in a care home, specifically for their participation in the World March Against Child Labour. And *Nexus Suits* were created and worn for marches against air pollution, against climate change. The work began to take on a more political meaning in this context.

How does your practice combine possibility, practicality, and politics?

In the 1990s, I was a consultant for Premiere Vision, the textiles trade fair in Paris, so I was extremely lucky to have access to the most innovative textiles of the time. Materials became a starting point for many of the sculptures I made. I was particularly interested in new technical developments, such as the "breathable" membranes, Teflon coatings, Kevlar fibers, anti-abrasive, anti-shock, bulletproof, fire-resistant, etc. I interpreted the technical properties of the fabrics into metaphorical ideas. I designed a psychological refuge using textiles that filtered electromagnetic waves and, for *Refuge Wear Survival Sacs*, I used a thermochromic fabric that changed color to warn against freezing temperatures.

The most important aspect was the potential for the work to spark imagination, not necessarily the functionality. I wanted to prompt others to invent new solutions. *Refuge Wear* resembles anoraks, rucksacks, and sleeping bags simultaneously: the items transform, and the instructions for how to convert them are visible, printed on the fabric. Although the practical applications are inherent in the design, I hoped the work could be as open-ended as possible and function as a catalyst for new and better ideas to evolve.

I was deeply influenced by what we were living through at the time. The social and economic context of the deep global recession in the early 1990s encouraged my research practice. I was able to use clothing to express what was happening around us. Clothing had an immediacy because it was mobile and agile, flexible and modular. As I mentioned previously, I didn't see myself as a designer of clothing. I was an artist, imagining new possibilities, new futures, new spaces of habitation, of coexistence in a society that was becoming more hostile.

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I think all the work I've been discussing enables a sense of place and belonging. A feeling that you are part of a larger community with a set of values that are shared. It's about citizenship and civic-ness. Once you have acquired a sense of place, belonging, community, there is potential for your voice to resonate. Confidence is expressed by wearing the sculptures. For example: the teenagers who commissioned the *Nexus Architecture*, for the World March Against Child Labour. Their slogans were printed on the textiles to manifest their rights and place in the world. For this group, it was fundamental to inhabit the work, to be a visible part of a community, to take part in the march, to be at the heart of the discussion because they are the ones who are personally affected by the abuse of their fundamental rights.

What do your interventions do?

The interventions enable the work to be in dialogue with audiences. The work becomes present and active in public space and, through these public manifestations, render the invisible more visible. For example, placing *Refuge Wear* in locations around Paris, London, and New York in squats, railway stations, and subway stations was a way of drawing attention to the communities of people living on the margins and fringes of our cities.

Out of the many *Nexus Architecture* interventions, it's worth mentioning the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997). This intervention was made possible through workshops with migrant Zulu women from the Usindiso shelter. Each woman made her *Nexus Suit*, choosing her fabric print as a means of self-expression. The final designs were paraded during the biennale opening and in the streets of their neighborhood.

This public intervention was very emotional because the women were so proud to show their designs, to demonstrate their strength of connectedness through the metaphor of the Nexus—the social link. During the walk, they spontaneously broke into the "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", the national anthem, a significant song for the Black workers during the apartheid era. Singing that

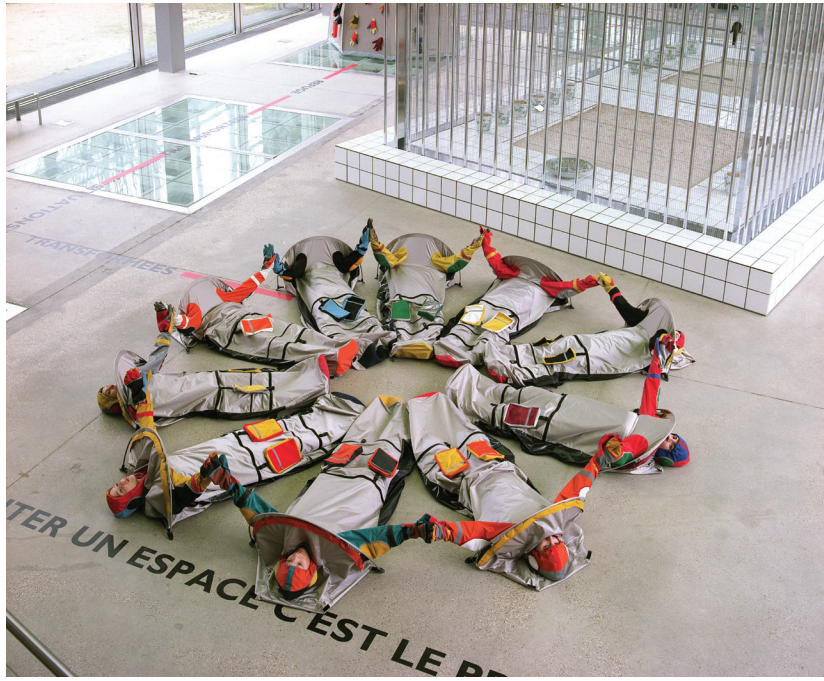

Figure 4.11
Modular Architecture–The Unit x 10, performance at the Foundation Cartier, Paris, 1996. Credit: Lucy + Jorge Orta / Photo: John Akehurst

out loud in public attracted other people who joined spontaneously and created a longer nexus chain, filled with Black and white passers-by not wearing *Nexus Suits*. This intervention was a potent manifestation of solidarity and connectedness, particularly after the oppression of the apartheid.

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The workshop also helped upskill the women with basic pattern-cutting and sewing techniques to stimulate them to become financially independent. At the end of the project, I mentioned that if the women continued to make suits to sell on the market, they wouldn't need the Nexus link. They replied,

"actually, this is the most important part." So, the symbolic content of the suits became the most significant part of the garment and this was the overwhelmingly powerful outcome of the intervention.

Overall, what interests me in *Nexus Architecture* is the manifestation of the interconnectedness of human beings across continents. It's a demonstration of our solidarity with other human beings and communities. It's particularly important now that we live in such a complex period, with the rise of nationalism and the borders and fences that are being erected to divide Europe and elsewhere in the world.