

Title, Identity + Refuge

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"I am convinced today that in the launching of socialization, if it is difficult to have access to and to go towards art and culture, art and culture must come towards our public. Culture must be included in the world of exclusion." Denis Lebaillif, director, Cité de Refuge

Further discussions with the Salvation Army residents, plus a series of more or less informal workshops — drawing classes and functionality trials of Refuge Wear — inspired Orta to build a "pilot project" with any of the residents who would volunteer. Over a period of four months, she worked with inmates to design outfits made from the second-hand clothing that had been donated to the Salvation Army shop.

As the residents had explained, one of their greatest losses, along with their homes, was their sense of identity in a city that had no place for them. They felt isolated, and missed feeling productive and creative. Initially, Orta tried to discuss the possibility of changing or negotiating their identities through the design of costumes for themselves, but it became apparent that most people felt uncomfortable working on such a personal level — a lack of confidence made it difficult for them to make choices directly concerning their own desires. So Orta changed tactics, and suggested they design outfits with other, imaginary wearers in mind.

Many residents at the Salvation Army had undergone profound psychological crises as a result of or in anticipation of their homelessness and, not surprisingly, the women in the shelter had suffered more than the men: they had often been the victims of physical violence and sexual abuse both before and while living on the street. No female residents were willing to participate in the workshop, and the all-male group Orta ended up working with ranged at different times from two to five men. Orta began by discussing identity through the identities of items of clothing — ties, gloves and underwear, articles found in abundance in the shop. She asked residents how they could change the identities of these objects by using multiples to make something new.

With Orta's help, the men then designed, cut and assembled new costumes. Staff and volunteers, motivated by their creativity and enthusiasm, sewed them together. The result was a line of very sexy clothing for women — a tight dress made of brassieres, a mini-skirt or "jeans" made from leather gloves, skirts and form-fitting jackets made of ties. These new clothes were so colourful, fun and funky that Orta and the residents decided to have a fashion show to demonstrate their successful productions.

Orta asked for volunteer models from the Lycée Professionel et Technique l'Assomption de Bondy, a high school in a poor area in north Paris. Thirty teenage girls signed up to model 24 outfits, and in July 1995 they staged a noisy catwalk performance at the Salvation Army.

In 1996, Orta sent the outfits to New York, where professional models wore them for a "runway" show that moved through the streets, from the Salvation Army on Spring Street to the gallery Deitch Projects, as part of Jeffrey Deitch's exhibition "Shopping". A number of reviewers commented on the quality of Orta's "avant-garde" clothing, so Orta decided to take advantage of their popularity. She is now discussing with the Henry Street Settlement, a New York non-profit organisation that shelters and aids homeless people, the aim to set up a permanent centre where unemployed residents can manufacture goods from second-hand items, to be sold for their own benefit. Jen Budney