

between art and action

lucy orta



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Utopia is a word that, since its popularisation via Thomas Moore's famous 1516 tract of the same name,¹ has been abused and misappropriated numerous times. This holds true in the contemporary art world also where the concept of utopianism, though central to twentieth-century modernism, has since been largely discredited and maligned. Curiously, the notion of utopianism has recently come to the fore again, if not generally, then certainly within the domain of the by now, thoroughly globalised contemporary art scene. One reason for this is the nature of this wider globalised scene itself, a corporatised scene driven by the demands of trans-national business everywhere purveying the spread of 'turbo-capitalism'. Thus, within the contemporary art world corresponding with this global situation, those artists aware but critical of corporate globalisation have turned evermore to exploring ways of addressing and circumventing its significant negative quotient.

Among such practitioners is the British, Paris-based artist Lucy Orta, exhibiting in the *Adelaide International 2010: Apart, we are together* for the Adelaide Festival. Orta's practice, alongside her contemporaries like Andrea Zittel, Atelier van Lieshout, the N55 collective and Thomas Hirschhorn to name but a few, is predicated overall on a utopian investigation and critique of the effects of corporate globalisation on the contemporary individual. Moreover, such a practice questions in particular, globalisation's dire effects on subjects unable to access the material and social privileges that globalisation, as a positivist discourse, invariably promises. The utopianism evident in Orta's work, its desire to not only represent life but change it, is by no means naive though. Neither is it nostalgic for romanticised images of earlier avant gardes. Utilising a range of inter-disciplinary means, Lucy Orta, in close collaboration with her husband Jorge, an Argentinean artist and activist,² challenge through their collective multidisciplinary activities, globalisation's hegemonic assumptions. In doing so, they also indict globalisation's rampant tendency to isolate and discard those deemed unnecessary to its hyperbolic operations.

For *Adelaide International: Apart, we are together* Orta presents a continuation of her Nexus Architecture project (1993-2002), a series emblematic of her wider practice.³ For these public pieces, which combine architecture, performance and fashion, invited individuals come together to be physically joined by clothing specially designed by Orta, often in collaboration with the participants themselves. Some of these clothing items have also been designed remotely via the Internet by interested would-be participants.⁴ This process further extends the metaphoric implications of the term Nexus which means, "link or bond, (where) the symbolic content is more important than functional. The inter-connected system of channels, zippers and connecting elements (of Nexus Architecture) are direct embodiments of the idea of social link—a 'social sculpture'".⁵

The social aspect of these works is eminently apparent with mass participants joined together either front to back in snaking queues or as a standing group interconnected in grid formation. The nature of these performances, like the clothing itself, which is reminiscent—albeit in a quasi sci-fi mode—of outdoor or adventure wear, is ambiguous. For instance, are such performances, given that they are often semi-obstructive interventions occurring in public places, actually protests, or are they just art? Such a question is even more pertinent considering some of the contexts in which Orta has produced Nexus Architecture. At the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in 1997 for example, Orta collaborated with migrant female labourers from the Usindiso women's hostel who co-designed their own costumes⁶ and at the Biennale's opening, "formed a defiant chain linking the city and exhibition venues".⁷ Similarly, in 2002 Orta organised Nexus Architecture x 110-Nexus Type Cholet, for a group of one hundred and ten children in Cholet, France. While undoubtedly playful, this piece was also an extension of another presented in 1998 in Lyon and designed to bring public attention to the "Global March Against Child Labour", a steady increase in child labour being one of globalisation's more archaic pseudo-Victorian manifestations.

With works such as these mind, it would seem that Orta's greater project was transparently linked, in a spirit of protest, to the idea, also prominent in today's global art world, of art as activism. Yet, Orta herself, not discounting her strong conviction in the social import of art, complicates this assumption,

*The work we do is entirely an artistic endeavour based on a conception of how we envision contemporary art and its ability to communicate with all kinds of different audiences and intervene in all walks of life as a means to building a more equitable and sustainable world. We are picking up from where Beuys left, convinced that art has the power to transform not just the individual, but society at large and we are eager to try as many different artistic formats and strategies as possible.*⁸

The reference to Beuys and his "social sculpture" may seem odd taking into account the German artist's almost messianic self-fashioning. Indeed, such fashioning of the artist as righteous redeemer appears distinctly alien to the Orta enterprise which these days operates predominantly under the appellation Studio Orta, a collective that consists foremost of Lucy and Jorge Orta, but is additionally,

*a virtual canopy under which many different people work, with different competences from artists, technicians, curators, administrators etc., who come and go depending on the scale and time frame of a project. We have a permanent staff to manage the day-to-day running of the different studios, conditioning of artworks and touring exhibitions. Our practice has grown and the work more voluminous so our physical spaces have enlarged too. We now occupy a studio in central Paris, The Dairy (2000) and Les Moulins (2007), which are both near Paris in a new cultural development we are instigating... We founded Studio Orta in 1991 so that we could work with and employ associates with a vision to create a large enterprise-like structure in the spirit of the Factory—it's difficult to ignore the Warholian legacy.*⁹

The associated *The Gift-Life Nexus* works consequently invoke yet another gift economy, which ultimately imply questions of life and death. Actually, there could be no more potent a gift economy than that suggested by organ donation, which is in the most literal sense, usually a gift of life. Once more, the centrality of the motif of the gift economy is foregrounded in Orta's practice. Its dramatic proximity to considerations of life and death in *The Gift-Life Nexus* pieces are equally present—albeit more subtly—in the 20x7 *The Meal* performances; the gift of food also bestows life. Similarly, the gift of shelter implied through the *Nexus Architecture* project indicates related concerns for the fragility and vulnerability of life particularly as it is exposed to the challenges of a cut-throat post-industrial world. Perceived from a global perspective, the highly emotive and ethically complex matter of organ donation calls to mind also the massive illegal, 'heartless' and basically sinister, contemporary trans-national trade in body organs. The disturbing reach of such trade—that regularly involves bribery, coercion, kidnapping and murder—simply illustrates that in a globalised scenario overwhelmingly purveying the instrumentalism of Capital, life is cheap, even if its constituent components are extremely expensive. Overall, Orta aims to partially circumvent the instrumentalism of the global-capitalist ethos by proposing alternative methodologies and works that are open-ended, poetic, emotive and ambiguous.

By now, the utopian dimension of Orta's practice will be clearly apparent; its privileging of collectivity, co-operation, experimentation and gifting all testify to a utopian impulse. This impulse is certainly evident in the three related strands of works showing in *Adefaide International*. Similarly apparent, is the distinctly humanitarian aspect of the Studio Orta enterprise, a fact doubly emphasised by statements made by Lucy Orta herself: "Art-making is profoundly emotional, an expression of hope, a proposal for alternative living, it's a life project; it's a commitment with yourself as well as with society."²¹

Of course, such stressing of the utopian and humanitarian capabilities of art-making have until relatively recently been more or less ridiculed; the globally dominant model of contemporary artistic endeavour being largely—whether 'ironically' or not—a quasi-corporate, individualistic business-g geared one. What Studio Orta's multifaceted activity proves is that a utopian and humanitarian direction need not automatically signify theoretical backwardness or naivety. In fact, one of Orta's more renowned supporters is the French theorist of time, speed, technology and art, Paul Virilio, a writer who could be accused of idealism, but certainly not of simple-mindedness. Like Virilio, Orta recognises the dystopian surfeit—social, economic and personal—that comes with contemporary globalisation. And while Orta does not believe that her art, or any art for that matter, could alter this situation holus-bolus, she is certainly convinced that art can change life on a micro-level. Micro-change affected by a commitment to collective action is made powerful when it is recognised as interconnecting with diversely distributed practices similarly inclined. Furthermore, commitment to change of any kind avoids the habitual cynicism associated with many facets of the global, hyper-capitalistic art industry, and consciously distances itself from this. In place of slavishly craving adulation within this network, Studio Orta utilises the art world's presentational structures as merely one avenue of possibility among others.

On a contrasting note, the importance of ambiguity to the output of Studio Orta saves it from misguided evangelical readings. The *Nexus Architecture* series could equally read 'negatively' as representations of an enforced or artificial connection. These works could also be read as theatrically enacting the kind of servitude commonly associated with the prison chain gang, despite the colourful, celebratory garments. Meanwhile, the term "nexus", used variously throughout Orta's production, could distantly conjure the distinctly nightmarish world of the "Nexus 6" Replicants or clones popularised by Ridley Scott's iconic 1982 film *Blade Runner*. The "nexus" in this instance is a biogenetic one and therefore relevant as a potential reference for Orta's endeavour, because of the latter's strong emphasis on the innate relatedness of disparate and otherwise physically disconnected individuals and communities. Pursuing this contra-dialectic it could be remembered as well that personal connection, as well as the desire for it, instead of basically biological is actually, eminently contextual.

For instance, a writer like the outspoken Czech novelist Milan Kundera, would remind anyone that for those who grew up under Communist, or other types of forcibly communalising dictatorships, there could be nothing more liberating than the solitude of one's own time and thoughts. Could this not also be the case though in a post-Communist, neo-liberal era where sociability is regularly pre-packaged or dictated predominantly through an emphasis on the consuming experience and spaces of shopping? Facing the sheer ubiquity of such a pervasive contemporary focus is not dis-connection as legitimate and freeing a gesture as the pseudo-social celebration of capital's intervention at every level of subjective life? Ultimately though, as far as Lucy and Studio Orta's production is concerned, it is the challenging ambiguity separating belief from critique and action from fiction, that positively propels art in a fraught global context. Rather than hopelessly impulsive and contradictory, it is the unavoidable tension or "agonism"²² engendered by such dialogue that the Orta project regards alternatively as vitally constructive; it is regenerative for art and for the future expansion of its possible social roles.

Notes

¹ Moore's Utopia, as has often been misunderstood, was not the author's attempted representation of a 'perfect land' but a satirical and hypothetical vehicle by which to address current issues of European politics and questions of Statehood. After all 'utopia', derived from the Greek, literally means "no-place"

² "Firstly as Jorge and I work together it's important to mention his background as this has played a core role in the foundation our common practice, although new influences have evolved the form, our conception of art has remained pretty constant. In reaction to the oppressive dictatorial regime in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 Jorge's passion and engagement for art was an extension of the youth movement ideologies and his personal mentors and friends, were artists Edgardo Vigo and Graciela G. Marx in Argentina, Clemente Padin in Uruguay and Dámaso Ogaz in Venezuela. Mail Art was used to exchange their ideas and strategies across Latin America and elsewhere overseas and they believed in the statement: "An art from the base upwards, without artists!" Email interview with the author December 2009-January 2010

³ "Nexus Architecture (1993-2002) is regarded as an emblem of my practice". Email interview, op cit.

⁴ This aspect of the Nexus Architecture is entitled D-FORM. It "proposes a method for creating Nexus suits that evolve through an analysis of our personal/emotional qualities and the body language of our postures. The challenge here is to preserve the collective integrity of the Nexus metaphor, yet allow each suit to manifest the uniqueness of each participant's personality. The project is online and anyone is free to personalise, design and create a suit http://www.studio-orta.com/dform_project/". Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "For the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale we began experimenting with personalising the suits and invited a group of migrant female labourers from a local shelter to select preferred graphic designs from Dutch Wax prints and Zulu Kangas, which produced some of the most spectacular pieces, each stitched by the women themselves." Orta also mentions "the positive empowering results of the Johannesburg workshops, and the women's attachment to the symbolic meaning of their garments". Ibid.

⁷ Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eds, Lucy Orta, London, New York: Phaidon Press, 2002: 19

⁸ Email interview, op cit.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The *All in One Basket* (1997-) and *Hortirecycling* (1999-) projects generally involve the explicit gathering and recycling of discarded food at markets like Les Halles in Paris. Many of these foods would be turned into preserves exhibited and sold either at the markets themselves or at galleries. As part of these interrelated series, Orta would video the process and record interviews with people about their attitudes to food and shopping. See Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eds, Lucy Orta 63-68.

¹⁴ Ibid: 95

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Email interview, op cit.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Some of these works revealingly betray a historical link to the early twentieth-century materialist theatre experiments of the Russian Constructivists. See in particular Orta's works, *Nexus Architecture x 50 - Nexus Type Operation VII and Modular Architecture x 10* 1996. Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eds, Lucy Orta: 126 and 128-129 (respectively)

²⁰ Email interview, op cit.

²¹ Robert Pinto, Nicholas Bourriaud, Maia Damianovic eds, Lucy Orta: 13

²² "Agonism" is a term championed by French theorist Chantal Mouffe to express the necessity of maintaining tension in democratic political process. This avoids the compromises of a collapse into a false and begrudging consensus. Agonism also acknowledges the centrality of difference in all communication and champions disagreement as both a necessary and vitally constructive force in genuinely democratic society and politics. See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London, New York: Verso, 2000