

LUCY + JORGE ORTA
LIGHT WORKS

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Language of LIGHT

Everything we see is a product of, and is affected by, the nature of light. Since the beginning of time, it has been a vital part of our lives and continues to have a great impact on art. As a form of energy that our sense of sight can detect, light also forms the basis of our perception of the primary colours, which artists have traditionally used when mixing pigment. It is the chosen medium for Studio Orta's *Light Works* where vast projectors act as 'brushes' to paint the landscape with it. The central visual component of *Light Works* is a codified system of thousands of graphic marks and signs called the planetary alphabet. This vast ongoing lexicon consists of representational and conceptual elements, drawn from diverse regions and cultures of the world both past and present. Linked to collective memory, it is a composite fusion of cultural, sacred, mythical and social elements. The alphabet is political in that it contests the notion of national identity in favour of a global vocabulary that aspires to communicate universal meaning. The signs comprise of individual pictograms of anthropomorphic shapes that aim to mirror our social reality. Besides personal artist statements, the signs and marks allude to familiar and obscure symbols, glyphs, pictograms and icons from biblical, hermetic and other mystical traditions. There's also frequent reference to archaeological material like the signs used in ancient writing systems such as Chinese pictograms or Mayan and Egyptian hieroglyphs that represent different objects, actions, sound or ideas.

The signs have their roots in circles, triangles, arrows, dots, suns, crosses, squares and other geometric shapes which are synthesised to create a pictographic, seemingly animated language of light. Some of the signs also resemble the ancient markings and carvings on stone called "petroglyphs". These tend to incorporate the five most universal shapes—the circle, the cross, the triangle, the spiral and the square. It is claimed that some of these prehistoric drawings and paintings with abstract non-figurative patterns, such as zigzags, wavy lines, dots, grids and arabesques result from the vision of people undergoing trance. This may have a relationship with shamanistic rituals or be purely schematic with narrative functions. Pictograms are still in use as the main medium of written communication in some non-literate Third World cultures. Because of their graphical nature and fairly realistic style they are also common in contemporary urban life as simple, pictorial, representational symbols where they are widely used to indicate services in public areas. In the same way the planetary alphabet is intended as a form of global communication that transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The alphabet is an ever-evolving system to represent inherently human archetypal signs. This has parallels with CG Jung's proposal that some symbols are 'archetypes' since they have a universal range of meaning across individual and cultural



Rive des Amériques, 1992
Musée de l'homme Paris, France
Commemorating the 500-year anniversary of the 'Encounter of two Worlds'



borders. When we view signs or symbols, their meanings and associations are naturally and unavoidably there. We acquire universal associations all through our life, and usually without being aware that we are acquiring them. The planetary alphabet includes signs that will have personal, cultural, and universal associations for the viewer conveying many unpredictable layers of meaning to a diverse audience. Rooted in drawing practice it is both personal and archetypal. According to Jorge Orta the alphabet comprises in part “contextual signs and images of a collective memory”. Each project has provided the opportunity to create a multitude of new signs assisted by the advances in computer technology and digital manipulation since the early 1990s. The ongoing alphabet has been organised into a number of specific categories: Ideogram Signs, Objects Signs, Meta-social Signs, Textual Signs and Sound Signs.

For each project the methodology involves a process of intensive research into the history and the present locale of the individual sites in order to develop the signs. *Imprints on the Andes* at Macchu Pichu and *Rives des Amériques* in Paris, 1992, had elements of Inca hieroglyphs and incorporated aspects of the present day indigenous culture. It included extensive studies of ancient Peru petroglyphs, Inca illustrations and reports of the Spanish conquest by local people both past and present on exhibit in the Musée de Beaux-Arts in Chartres. For *The Cry of the Earth*, 1994, the Aso volcano project, Kyushu, Japan, the research process involved the sketching of the source imagery on paper scrolls in calligraphic ink. The designs of natural forms like leaves; shells and stones were projected as abstracted ideograms, providing an intuitive sign system originating in

nature. The signs used in *Woven Light*, 1995, at Cappadocia were inspired by motifs found in traditional Turkish rugs, which were emblematic of the collective memory of the troglodyte villages. *Sacred Light*, 1994, celebrating Chartres cathedral’s 800th anniversary, included signs based on crosses and other Christian iconography and the signatures of the stonemasons who originally built it.

The signs are usually projected onto immense locations in places of natural beauty or cultural significance using the so-called “image cannons” invented by French engineer, Léon Miquel. Presentation to mass-audiences relates to Jorge Orta’s notion of *Citizen Art* and his first innovative public actions in Rosario, Argentina from the late 1970s. Here he staged projections in public spaces using the latest technologies such as carousel slide projectors or video monitors in front of large audiences. This was during the military dictatorship (1976–1983) when public gatherings for art performances were forbidden as they were viewed as potentially subversive. In resistance to the government art censorship, like some other South American artists, who used mail art and performance such as Eugenio Dittborn or Edgardo Vigo, Orta’s practice broadened from painting to include a non-object based alternative form of visual communication. *Light Works* subsequently evolved as an ongoing practice with a mission to communicate with a wider public rather than a specialist art audience. *Light Works* are anti-materialistic and outreach to a vast audience on their own terrain beyond the confines of the insular, elitist system of gallery-based contemporary art.

Although the planetary alphabet is present in Jorge Orta's formative solo works it continues to feature in major projects done in collaboration with his partner Lucy with whom he founded Studio Orta in Paris in 1991. The following year they worked together on *Imprints on the Andes*, which is probably the most quintessential example of *Light Works*, due both to its conceptual impact and technical complexity. The project included an arduous expedition with heavy equipment across the Andes mountain range, to reach Machu Picchu which is one of the most impressive pre-Columbian archaeological sites. It involved projecting the signs from the planetary alphabet on to the sacred mountains surrounding the ancient ruins before two hundred thousand spectators. The event coincided with the official celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the Americas. However in the local context this project represented a symbolic act of resistance from the indigenous inhabitants of America as a challenge to the official celebration of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.

Imprints on the Andes was also staged to coincide with the traditional Inca festival of the sun or *Inti Raymi*, to mark the winter solstice of the Southern Hemisphere. This was the most important and spectacular annual festivity carried out by the Incas who believed they were descendants of the sun. Nowadays it is held on 24 June in Saqsaywaman, a fortress built by the Incas in the sixteenth century to resist the invasion of the Spanish *conquistadores*. It comprises a ceremony with the crowning of the Inca king who is actually an ordinary citizen chosen among the people to be the leader of the solar year. Hundreds participate wearing historical Inca costumes, and during the ceremony the incarnation of the Sun God delivers a speech containing guidance for the times ahead to the assembled multitude. *Imprints on the Andes* was therefore able to communicate with the local spectators and revitalise their ancient traditions. Although they were generally unable to read and write they were familiar with some of the signs and pictograms that related to their own culture, which were projected over their sacred mountains.

The site or landscape onto which the signs are projected becomes an integral part of each project although the *Light Works* should not be confused with Land Art. Their intention is more anthropological than visual, driven by conservation and environmental concerns involving a complex fusion of cosmology, collective memory, social experiences and popular beliefs. Some of the most effective projects have involved sites that have a sacred significance such as Machu Picchu, Cappadocia and Chartres Cathedral. They add an important dimension to *Light Works* because they're interwoven with peoples' beliefs, traditions, religions and rituals. Besides being used for worship, prayers and sacrificial offerings to deities, many sacred places were once sites for seeking oracular wisdom or spiritual purification. They also symbolise a kind of world axis since

some of them are built on ley lines that are believed to give them psychic energy. Sacred places can often retain an aura of sanctity simply because our senses can react in the same ways as they did in our ancient forebears. They provoke a sense of the spiritual within us now as then, because even though the way our minds work may differ from our ancestors, we share common psychological impressions. Some inborn need to experience place in such meaningful ways could explain why so many of us are attracted to powerful sacred sites of antiquity steeped in the mythic power and imagery of our ancestors. And yet they are deemed sacred not only through the physical characteristics of their locations but also because of the mentality that perceives them as sacred.

By temporarily illuminating the landscape *Light Works* can reawaken a lost sense of spirituality in the spectator and offer them an opportunity to reflect on mankind's origin and ongoing existence with an awareness of the unbounded universe. They may prompt quite complex questions by means of an alternate history where the landscape resonates with narratives of collective memory and personal experiences. *Light Works* facilitate a kind of psychogeography with a placement of memory through association with forgotten language, names, stories, myths and rituals. They reference the past through the planetary alphabet of signs where buildings and landscape are rendered contemporary through a synthesis of past and present civilisation. *Light Works* embrace Studio Orta's ongoing mission to establish connections between mankind and nature, linking the historical context of the site with a collective consciousness thereby creating a powerful fusion of self, space and time.



L' Art des Incas, 1992
Musée des Beaux-Arts Chartres, France
Opening of the exhibition 'The Art of the Incas'

