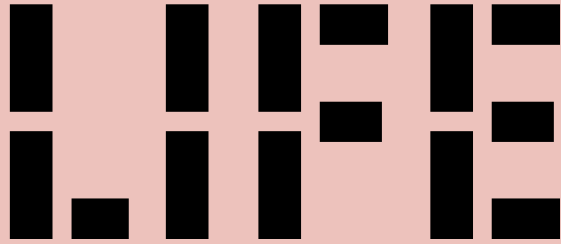




**LUCY
+ JORGE
ORTA**

**FOOD
WATER
LIFE**

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**Subject = Object:
*Antarctic Village—
No Borders***

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Because Lucy + Jorge Orta's *Antarctic Village—No Borders* body of work marks two distinctly new directions in their way of working, our understanding of their practice needs to shift. The Antarctica project represents on the one hand, a move toward a more specific subject, and on the other, a more abstract object. While still absolutely linked, the relationship between subject and object has expanded, making room for our participation.

Subject

The Ortas' collaborative endeavors are typically driven by their research into subjects that are not geographically circumscribed, but rather, touch all of us. They are concerned with conditions that define survival, such as the availability of food—642 million people in Asia and the Pacific Islands are hungry, as are 265 million in sub-Saharan Africa—and the diminishing supply of water—more than a billion people lack access to clean water, and that figure is growing exponentially.^{1,2} With *Antarctic Village—No Borders*, Lucy + Jorge Orta turn their humanitarian and artistic efforts to a specific geographic location as an emblem for issues there that are, in fact, global. Antarctica, oxymoronically, provided fertile ground for their first body of work generated by a specific location.

The preamble to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty introduces us to this unique place:³

Recognizing that it is in the interest of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue for ever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of international discord;

Acknowledging the substantial contributions to scientific knowledge resulting from international cooperation in scientific investigation in Antarctica;

Convinced that the establishment of a firm foundation for the continuation and development of such cooperation on the basis of freedom of scientific investigation in Antarctica as applied during the International Geophysical Year accords with the interests of science and the progress of all mankind;

Convinced also that a treaty ensuring the use of Antarctica for peaceful purposes only and the continuance of international harmony in Antarctica will further the purposes and principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations.⁴

The treaty elaborates through fourteen additional articles that Antarctica is to be a place free from weapons, nuclear activity, and military presence. Scientific investigations undertaken there will be collaborative in both process and in the sharing of results, and should there be disputes, article IX notes:

Those Contracting Parties shall consult among themselves with a view to having the dispute resolved by negotiation, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement or other peaceful means of their own choice.

The treaty has forty-eight member nations, from Argentina to Venezuela, the most recent joiner being Monaco in 2005. Scientific experiments conducted in Antarctica range from the investigation of ice as a radio-frequency radiator to the protection of marine life. Studies on the effects of isolation on the population of researchers—sequestered there for months at a time, across 4.5 million square miles—have also been conducted.⁵

This international community—not defined by divisive political borders, but dedicated to learning about, and hopefully arresting, the deterioration of the planet—inspired the Ortas to launch *Antarctic Village—No Borders*, and the artists have created a vocabulary of forms that expresses the values and aspirations embodied in this to-date-successful experiment. Antarctica becomes the synecdoche for collaborative human existence defined by freedoms rather than restrictions. A similar approach to content through subject can also be seen in the Ortas' *Fallujah* project, lasting from 2002 to 2007, and in *Amazonia*, a new body of work in development based on their 2009 expedition along the Madre de Dios River—a tributary of the Amazon, the second-longest river in the world—from its source in Calillona, Peru, to its mouth in northeastern Brazil.

Object

It is the zone of frisson between theater and life, object and metaphor, that the Ortas' collaborations singularly occupy. With roots in the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys—a notion ratified by the numerous works on paper, editioned objects, and posters announcing performances by Beuys that fill the walls of the artists' Paris home—the trajectory of their practice brings us into new and important territory. First, the objects they create are arresting, powerful, engrossing, and evocative. In terms of manufacture, they are designed and engineered to meet any industry's standards. In contrast with Beuys's monotone, cerebral objects, Lucy + Jorge Orta celebrate color and texture; bring together found and fabricated objects; re-create two-dimensional images (such as photographs) in three-dimensional forms; and have even used sound as part of their sculptural pieces. Theirs is work that embraces the public, invites participation, and incites thought and action. The social intervention aspect that defines Lucy's own practice and the architectural ambition of Jorge's support each other. But the defining point in the Ortas' work is that here, metaphor and actuality merge, and subject becomes object. Sculptures about the purification of water in fact

purify water, and pieces about the scarcity of food and wanton waste are actual stations for food preparation. And this is unique.

More often, the objects made by performance artists are remnants, reminders: Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage's 1951 work *Automobile Tire Print*, the snapshots of Allan Kaprow and Vito Acconci acts, the videos of Yoko Ono's performances. The nearest precedent for this subject/object conflation might be Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks*—initiated in 1982 at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany—which began as a pile of as many basalt posts, dwarfing the entry to the Museum Fridericianum. Beuys led the effort to plant seven thousand trees in Kassel over the next several years, and a basalt post was placed by each tree. With the planting of each tree, the war-flattened city grew more verdant, and the mountain of stone on the lawn in front of the exhibition hall diminished. This project was to be the beginning of a worldwide environmental effort. More common today, in our increasingly meta world, is the web-based project *Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks*, created by Eva and Franco Mattes in 2007.⁶ Here, the basalt posts—images of them, that is—are heaped on the Goethe-Institut's island site in the virtual-reality world of Second Life, ready to diminish as Second Life participants “plant” trees across that alternate and imaginary world, a conceptual greening of the globe. This is a good idea, maybe, but more than ideas are needed.

With the Antarctica project, the connection between object and action is more amorphous, less specific, than in the Ortas' water and food works. For instance, when we scrutinize the project's huts, called *Dome Dwellings*, we see that they are not actually habitable, and the piece's *Drop Parachutes* function as symbols rather than tools. The artists' description of the project opens with statistics that draw a vivid picture of this place:

Antarctica, *the end of the world*: boasting the most hostile climatic conditions, the coldest place on earth with temperatures reaching -80 °C in winter, the largest frozen desert in the world, containing 90 percent of the world's ice (approximately 70 percent of the world's fresh water), no permanent human residents, and no indigenous population.⁷

The contrast between the Eden-like mandate for the place and its extreme geography is reiterated in all the work that comprises *Antarctic Village—No Borders*. Some fifty domed habitats—or more accurately, emblems of habitation—populate white, sheer sheets of Antarctic ice pack, each tent made from the flags of the member nations of the Treaty. Garments and gloves are joined to their surfaces, which also hold silkscreen-printed texts that state, “Everyone has the right to move freely and circulate beyond the state borders to a territory of their choice.” Also stenciled is the Ortas' proposal for a new article to the United Nations declaration.

Encampments of these domed structures are situated sequentially at four locations across the continent. The artists' log describes the harsh weather conditions: "South Village—lat.64°14' south, long.56°37' west, visibility 100 to 900 meters, with snow and haze. Temperature -9 °C with 12km/h winds. The first day of sufficiently clement weather for the operation." Encampments followed at North Village, then East Village and West Village.⁸ The tents embody freedom of movement, the crossing of borders that are so often artificially imposed and politically driven. Those without a country—marooned in the wrong place—need moveable shelters, and above all, the right of free passage. The tents' vivid colors against the whiteness and their notion of home in such inhospitable surroundings are some of the clashing elements that define *Antarctic Village—No Borders*.

When picked up by the arctic winds, the gloves attached to the tents flap and flutter, appearing either to reach out to make contact or to poignantly signal that help is needed. Both readings make sense. Auguste Rodin explored the power of gesture—how even if it isolated, it is eloquent. Before him, Michelangelo depicted the reaching and near touching of hands to great symbolic effect. The Ortas provide an updated exploration. The hand—and by proxy, the glove—is a loaded image, a symbol for what separates mankind from the animal kingdom, as a user of tools in need of human connections.

Drop Parachutes and *Life Line—Survival Kit*, two major parts of the overall body of work, incorporate dueling points of view: help is urgently needed / help has arrived. Their merging of flags with text, as was done on the tents, continues the litany of our quest to survive, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Laden with the tools of survival—some addressing the need for water, others for food, children's toys for comfort, clothing, or medical supplies—*Drop Parachutes* and *Life Line* signal urgency and emergency. Oddly, the parachute and life saver are not common images in art, even though the tension between being aloft and aground, and the many plausible readings of these opposites, would seem fruitful images for artists.

Staked into the ice, a wind-ruffled flag "destined to become the flag of the planet and the human beings it represents, to be raised as a supranational emblem of human rights," marks this remote place as one that could represent the future.⁹ The artists took the flags of numerous nations and bled their distinct designs together, creating a pattern that speaks of international cooperation, a world where borders are soft.¹⁰ Lucy + Jorge Orta called this flag the *Métisse Flag*, in reference to the French term *métissage culturel*—a consciously chosen mixing of cultures—which has no precise English translation, perhaps because the concept is largely foreign to us.

Symbol

Heads or Tails, Tails or Heads is a series of soccer matches launched by the Ortas that opened and concluded their expedition. Meteorologists, paleontologists, and geologists from the Marambio Antarctic Base played an "all nations" match wearing team shirts made by the artists. Each shirt's front was made from one country's jersey, and its back came from another, making it impossible for the players to decipher offense from defense, their own team members from their adversaries. Jorge Orta comments, "This match mirrors human behaviour. Appearances are often deceiving. Someone we think is a friend may actually be playing against us, while a total stranger can surprise us with an act of solidarity. It is not appearances that count, but rather decisive actions in critical moments. We hope that our voyage to Antarctica and the spirit of cooperation that we gained here will generate greater awareness to the plight of refugees across the world."¹¹ These Antarctic games are in the spirit of the soccer matches staged by Sir Ernest Shackleton when, during the winter of 1915, his expedition was marooned on Antarctic ice, just a day from their destination. These games were part of Shackleton's successful efforts to maintain the morale of his crew. The first *Heads or Tails, Tails or Heads* game occurred en route to Antarctica, in Ushuaia, Falkland Islands. England played against Argentina, in remembrance of a disingenuous, two-and-a-half-month 1982 conflict between the two nations that claimed nearly one thousand lives, yet resulted in no actual changes in the governance of the British-dependent Falklands.

The foundation of *Antarctic Village—No Borders* is the *Antarctica World Passport*, an object and effort that began in 1995 and will continue until it culminates at the United Nations.¹² The first edition of the *Antarctica World Passport* is a symbolic proposal for a new nation of humanity. The passport may be issued to any person wishing to become a citizen of this continent, allowing them to travel freely throughout the world, but the artists request in return that each citizen take responsibility for their actions. The new world citizen will dedicate him- or herself to combating acts of barbarity, fighting against intimidation and poverty, supporting social progress, protecting the environment and endangered species, safeguarding human dignity, and defending the inalienable rights to liberty, justice, and peace in the world. The *Antarctica World Passport* recognizes the inherent dignity of every member of the human race, and supports an amendment to Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—*Art. 13:3*: "Every human being has the right to move freely and cross frontiers to their chosen territory. Individuals should not be deemed of an inferior status to that of capital, trade, telecommunication and pollution, all of which have no boundaries."¹³

Ten thousand numbered and signed booklets, which have all the components of and share their appearance with the standard passport, ensure a grassroots movement. The artists have set up passport office installations for the distribution of these documents, and the recipients can enter an online database (<http://antarcticaworldpassport.mit.edu/citizens/new>)—conceived in collaboration with Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Visual Arts Program—that will be part of the eventual presentation to the United Nations.

The link between subject and object within *Antarctic Village—No Borders* is more ambiguous than in the Orta’s earlier work, the function less direct in its relationship. The passport symbolizes the significance of this shift, and as the driving idea behind *Antarctic Village*, it highlights the new role that each of us play in the function. The participation of all of us who sign up for and receive a passport is implicit. Yes, we now own a wonderful multiple, but we have also joined a movement. We have signed a pledge. The work of Lucy + Jorge Orta, morally driven, brings art and its viewers into new territory, an arena defined by ethics and action.

NOTES

- 1 According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations’ most recent figures (Oct. 2009) and <http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>.
- 2 <http://www.nature.com/nature/focus/water/>.
- 3 http://www.ats.aq/e/ats_treaty.htm.
- 4 http://www.antarctica.ac.uk/about_antarctica/geopolitical/treaty/update_1959.php.
- 5 <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=has-anyone-ever-done-scie>.
- 6 <http://0100101110101101.org/home/reenactments/performance-beuys.html>.
- 7 Lucy Orta and Ann Marie Peña, “Antarctic Village—No Borders,” *The Hub: University of the Arts London Research Journal* (Mar. 2007), 14–18.
- 8 Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, ed., *Lucy + Jorge Orta: Antarctica* (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2008), 104–5, 109.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 10 The term “soft borders” comes from Julie Mostov’s book *Soft Borders: Rethinking Sovereignty and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- 11 Orta and Peña, “Antarctic Village—No Borders.”
- 12 *Antarctic 2000, Land of Welcome-Transparence* (Paris: Editions Jean Michel Place, 1996), 120.
- 13 Orta and Peña, “Antarctic Village—No Borders.”

