

DESIGN & INTERIORS

Worlds apart

The British artist Lucy Orta has made a home in Paris that combines work with a global collecting habit. Words by **Ian Phillips**. Photographs by **Jean-François Jaussaud**

THE ARTIST Lucy Orta once held a sit-down dinner for 3,000 people. A 300-metre-long table snaked through the streets of the northern French town of Dieuze, linking an abandoned salt mine and the town hall. Quite an exploit and one that she could not repeat in her space-challenged living room in Paris, where you'd have trouble feeding more than a dozen at a time. The space is not only small, but also multi-functional. Part of it was sectioned off years ago to create quarters for a former au pair. Another corner serves as her husband Jorge's office.

When they first visited the flat in the eastern Bercy district, Lucy had just given birth to their first child. They now have three — Leo (10), Pablo (9) and Emily (4). "When we came, the area was a building site," she recalls. "It was just surrounded by mud. We thought, 'Oh my God!'" Since then, the surroundings have completely changed. A park now flourishes and picturesque former wine warehouses have been transformed into a vibrant shopping centre nearby. The apartment too has a number of distinct advantages. It is situated in a block let out specially to artists. On the ground floor of the flat, a mezzanine (which serves as Orta's office) overlooks a purpose-built studio, which is full of both Lucy's and Jorge's work.

On the wall is a case for military blankets in the shape of a cross. On the tables are a dozen or so bronze hearts by Jorge. Depending on which day you turn up, there may be a whole stack of worst-for-wear windows or dozens of stretcher beds leaning against the wall by the door. Currently, there are drawings of a public sculpture which Lucy is creating for the city of Nottingham. It will be unveiled in the castle grounds in the late summer before travelling to Sunderland city centre.

Most of it are also at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London this month, as part of a show devoted to Orta's work. Part of a series entitled "Dwellings", on which she has collaborated with engineer Aran Chadwick of atelier one, it consists of an army truck fixed with a mesh structure in the form of a heart. Attached to this is an inflatable bubble, covered with graphics devised in partnership with a group of local Nottingham artists.

It bears all the hallmarks of Orta's work — collaboration with local communities to

enforce social bonds (she has worked in the past with members of a Salvation Army hostel and inmates of a prison in the eastern French city of Metz) and the idea of mobile shelters that could theoretically be used in crisis situations. She began exploring themes of survival, protection and homelessness in 1992 after the first Gulf War. "It was a response to the aid appeal for refugees," she recounts. "They were looking for both clothing and protective sheeting to make temporary shelters. So, I combined them."

The result was "Refuge Wear", a series of wearable shelters, combining tents, sleeping bags and bivouacs, as well as protruding gloves, legs and hoods. Another important aspect to her work is her reflection on wasted food. It came about after she noticed how much was dumped at the end of Paris markets. "The vendors buy cheap produce because they want to be able to propose low prices," she says. "So, of course, at the end of the day it's rotting and gets thrown out." In 1997, she collected discarded produce over the course of a year and preserved it in the form of pickles and jams. She also recorded conversations with other post-market gleaners and arranged an open-air buffet near Les Halles shopping complex in the centre of Paris.

Out of that came a series of dinners in different European cities (one of which was Dieuze). She christened the project "70x7" after the Biblical symbol for infinity. "It's a kind of multiplication game," she says. "Seven people are each allowed to invite seven other people." She serves them dishes made from produce that had been thrown away, designs a special plate for each event and takes delight in mixing different groups. In Bolzano, Italy, she invited members of both the local gay and immigrant associations, as well as figures from the mayor's office and the opposition.

Brought up near Solihull, Orta, now 37, went to live in Versailles for three years at the age of 13 (her engineer father was posted overseas). "That transformed me," she says. "It gave me a different attitude, a different vision, a different way of thinking. I had a moped at 16, which is really French. I listened to Jean Michel Jarre and smoked Gitanes."

She went on to study fashion knitwear at Trent Polytechnic before moving back to Paris in 1989, where she worked as both a trend

LA VIE EN ROSE Lucy Orta, middle left, with some of her work. Her studio (top right) and apartment in Bercy, houses her various collections including the Peruvian dolls (middle right). The military trucks (bottom left) are stored in the artist's retreat, a former dairy on the outskirts of Paris

consultant and a designer. "I still see people walking around in sweaters I designed eight years ago," she laughs. Stylishness also stuck (the day we met, Orta was dressed in a Joseph tank top and a pair of Helmut Lang trousers).

Scattered around the flat are many objects brought back from a four-week trek that Jorge (who's from Argentina) and Lucy made through the Andes 12 years ago. There are dolls made from ancient fabrics unearthed in Peruvian tombs. "As people are so poor there, a lot of them pillage tombs," explains Jorge. There are also Bolivian and Peruvian ceremonial bowls sculpted with llamas' heads and other quirky objects picked up from other trips including sugar moulds from Mexico. Aboriginal tapping sticks and a dilly bag, a pleated Zulu skirt made from pigskin and a Turkish saddle bag, which acts as a decorative cover for an armchair in the sitting room.

On the wall of the former au pair's room is a series of traditional ex votos. Today, Jorge works with a Mexican family of painters in Mexico to create contemporary versions. "Every day, I go through the papers and cut out pictures and articles about current events. I pass them on to the family and they interpret them in their own way." The results can be seen on the wall of Jorge and Lucy's bedroom. One, in the shape of a gun, reads "Weapons on their own generate aggressiveness, violence and delinquency. Be careful!"

For the past four years, the couple have been involved in turning an 1880s industrial dairy in the Brie region to the east of Paris into an artist's retreat. Called "La Laiterie Moderne" (or "Modern Dairy"), it has so far welcomed prestigious names, such as the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban and Austrian sculptor Erwin Wurm. It also houses dozens of military trucks, which Lucy is using in her work. "The idea is not only to explore the idea of mobility and circulation," she says, "but also to transform the military into the civilian." No doubt, then, that the Modern Dairy is something of a godsend. It would, after all, be rather a push to fit them into the Paris apartment.

"Dwellings" is at the RIBA Florence Gallery, 66 Portland Place, London W1, (020-7307 3690) until 20 April. "Lucy Orta: a new book of the artist's work, is published by Phaidon, priced £24.95 as part of the Contemporary Artists Series

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