



## corporeal limits

DESIGN IS FASHIONABLE – A FACT WHICH SHOULD GIVE US PAUSE, BECAUSE THE POLITICS OF DESIGN ARE TO DO WITH AFFLUENCE AND COMMODIFICATION. THE WORLD ENDORSED BY DESIGN IS INVARIABLY ONE WITH A COMFORTABLE HIERARCHY OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE. BUT THE WORK OF LUCY ORTA SUBVERTS THIS TENDENCY. JOHN BOZE BRALIC PROFILES THE WORK OF THIS ANTI-DESIGNER.





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"Poetry is more than a sweet melody on curves." – Jean Genet

Paris-based Lucy Orta is a British artist whose work moves across a range of idioms, bringing together fashion, textiles, social activism, architecture, body art and food in an effort to confront and re-expose issues that are rarely allowed to account for themselves in the dominant public spheres of advertising and the mass media. Orta's approach is that social alienation cannot be reduced to a logistical problem, nor understood through commodification by an indifferent public that has lost its own forms of autonomous signification, but only by allowing marginalisation to express itself. There are no overt ideological agendas in Orta's world. She is not a purist demanding unknown utopias. Instead, by encouraging the need to be recognised and remembered through her various workshops, interventions and events, her aesthetics encounter a moral dimension. As with Shigeru Ban's work and Future Systems' proposals for temporary homeless housing in London, Orta relates technical ingenuity to compassion, and traumas to a fragile style.

"In times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." – Eric Hoffer

In March 1997, at Les Halles markets in Paris, Orta arranged for renowned local chef Stohrer to create recipes from daily discarded fruit and vegetables, bringing attention to the monumental and highly visible waste of food that could provide free and much needed nutrients to the poor, homeless, migrants and other sub-groups. Involving Stohrer and Le Forum Saint Eustache Gallery meant access to a wider public, while passers-by were interviewed and provided with free tastings. The proceeds from selling the produce were given to a local AIDS charity. The project was not only about raising awareness of the absurdity of throwing away tonnes of fresh and edible produce, but also and quite significantly, the event took place at Les Halles, an emblematic location for the contested terrain between global commercial forces and local cultures, where the tourists, underground shopping malls, soup kitchens and scavengers on the street can bring into question the interdependency of society.

The project evolved later at the Naschmarkt in Vienna, testing a new organisational system of collecting, preparing and distributing food. Once again, an art gallery (the Secession) and an esteemed local chef, Staud, participated. Orta's work, like her subjects, is inherently rootless, belonging equally in art galleries as on the street. The effect is that previously separated communities and individuals are brought together over common concerns, so that their combined efforts can lead to effective action and legislation. The third instalment of the project was in the form of a dinner at the Kunstraum in Innsbruck for invited guests and key community members, to discuss problems of food distribution and consumption. The name of the project, 70x7, is a biblical reference meaning infinite – the >>



>> idea being that a meal is organised for an infinite number of people. In this case, the specially made 490 porcelain plates and 70-metre tablecloth were packaged in wooden crates made by local carpenters, so that the meal, its purpose and symbolism could be perpetuated.

Orta's approach to food is repeated with clothing. Finding a patron in the Salvation Army in Paris, she conducted a pilot project appropriating donated clothes – mostly ties, gloves and underwear – to create couture. She also staged a noisy fashion parade at the Salvation Army with volunteer models from a high school in a poor area of Paris. The work received praise from the fashion world and inspired new programs such as the Henry Street Settlement in New York, a non-profit organisation where the homeless would begin making similar clothes for themselves and for a profit.

"Culture must be included in the world of exclusion." – Denis Lebaillot

Orta's approach to clothing is more extensive, as revealed by her *Body Architecture* prototypes. She is applying recent innovations in fabrics such as metallic fabrics and micro-porous polyesters, mainly seen in

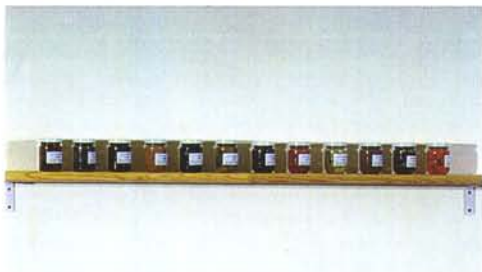


TOP: HORTIRECYCLING ENTERPRISE. ABOVE AND BELOW: ALL IN ONE BASKET ACT I

sports and performance wear and fashion, to survival wear for crisis situations – her original *Refuge Wear* was inspired by images of the Kurdish exodus from Iraq in 1991. The potential of possibly hundreds of *Refuge Wear* uniforms assembling in adverse circumstances provides for a frightening and surreal vision and is part of the impact of Orta's projects, which are also designed to shock and generate support. The *Refuge Wear* performances, with clothes worn by the homeless and dancers, took place at housing estates, underground railway stations, art galleries and in street protests.

Collective applications of *Refuge Wear* are explored in *Modular Architecture*. Individual suits are waterproofed and insulated, while a versatile pocket arrangement enables the inhabitant to carry water, food, portable stoves and medical supplies. For an application in Rwanda, body bags were included. According to Camus, in a world deprived of intelligibility, the only meaning left is in human relationships. Here various combinations of modular suits can be reassembled to form tents or zipped together to share body warmth, while superfluous and colourful overnight parts hang from the exterior lining.

Orta's designs are a canvas for individual and group expression. The





TOP LEFT: CONNECTOR. TOP RIGHT AND ABOVE: 70 X 7 THE MEAL ACT III

full body suits, with survival apparel, offer protection and autonomy from a hostile exterior, and the glimmering surfaces, vibrant colours and tailoring bestow upon the users the authority of people under alert. The suits have been inscribed with a variety of signs, symbols, pictograms, slogans, and silkscreens of texts and images. In a 1997 workshop with a women's shelter in Johannesburg, African fabric designs and the new ANC flag were incorporated, and the suits were all connected by an umbilical link to show solidarity in a street performance that was animated by the spontaneous singing of songs from the Apartheid era. By directly addressing difficult social issues, Orta's work also engages the aesthetic and subjective questions that make things beautiful.

The emphasis on expression in *Body Architecture* is a poignant one. Synonymous with an era of tattooing, piercings, body scarring and streetwear, it represents a collective identity that is no longer connected with the wasteland of generic architecture, pseudo-humanistic urban landscaping and planning, erotic marketing, and traffic and consumption. The growing visibility of the homeless and the emergence of multicultural

megalopolis (which can no longer be confined to distant suburbs), with their myriad different faces, skin colours, hairstyles and idiosyncratic fashions and embellishments, confirms that contemporary urban subjectivity is one that is generally incongruous to the physical substance it inhabits. The body then, through clothes, food, music and fragments of memorable and familiar spaces, is the ultimate refuge for shared intelligence.

Orta's most recent work, *Connector*, functions as a series of Sectors that expand the ideas of *Modular Architecture*. It is an architectural infrastructure that manifests flexible and mobile villages. Individual units are comprised of transformable sleeping bags, domes, ground sheets, rucksacks and inhabitable clothes that can connect at will to a linear axis through open-ended zippers. Workshops are meant to establish prototypes and new forms of co-creation, and fabrication is either by Studio Orta or a professional body. Until now, the Sectors have included collaborations between art students and homeless aid centres in Brussels, psychiatric patients and art instructors in Quebec, teenagers from a family care centre and local architects in the US, and the creation of an international *Connector* journal to create and sustain international dialogue by art students in Tokyo.

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