

BE PREPARED

Paris-based British artist Lucy Orta has been making her paranoid urban-disaster 'structures' for years, yet she's little known here. In the wake of Katrina and with a solo show opening at the Barbican, this looks like being her moment

RACHEL COOKE



I AM WALKING through a former dairy building, which sits in luxuriantly rolling and strangely deserted countryside an hour outside Paris. It is very quiet, and rather still and close; I have a slight headache, and a creeping feeling on the back of my neck. Although I know that this industrial shell is the studio-cum-workshop of the artist Lucy Orta, it would be very easy to imagine that its owner had more sinister work in mind. This place is surely the secret outpost of some madman who intends to take over the world.

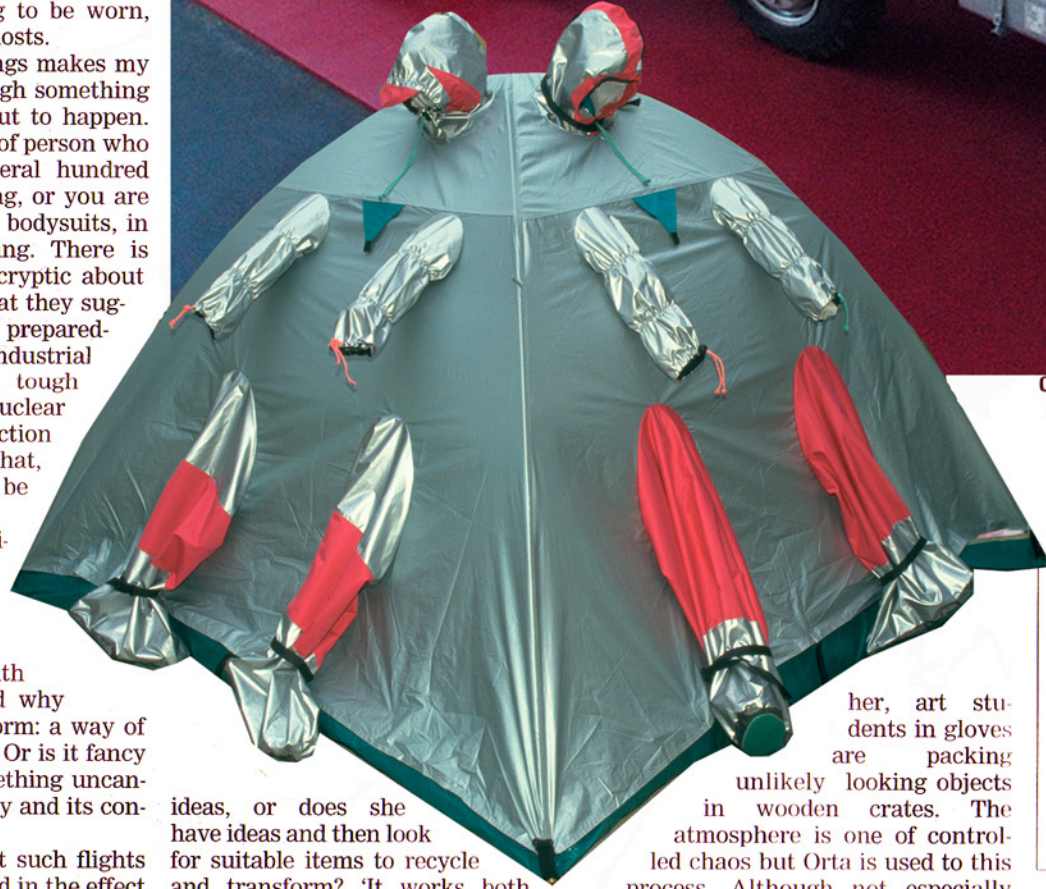
In what must once have been a milking shed are a dozen hulking army vehicles, parked as though suddenly abandoned. In a barn-like space, where pigeons mutter in the eaves, are 900 neatly stacked former Red Cross stretchers. Upstairs, it is worse. In a narrow corridor you stumble on a series of silver bodysuits, the kind a person might wear as protection during a chemical attack. They hang there patiently, waiting to be worn, like shimmery urban ghosts.

Looking at these things makes my chest feel tight, as though something very bad indeed is about to happen. Either you are the kind of person who finds the sight of several hundred first-aid boxes reassuring, or you are not. And I am not. The bodysuits, in particular, are unsettling. There is something so horribly cryptic about them because, for all that they suggest practicality and preparedness (manufactured to industrial standards, they look tough enough to survive a nuclear winter), on closer inspection it is hard to fathom what, exactly, they might be used for.

Attached to more military stretchers and covered with quotations, they have as much to do with containment as with survival, with death as with life. And why so many? Is this a uniform: a way of joining people together? Or is it fancy dress? For there is something uncannily sci-fi about the Dairy and its contents.

Orta herself laughs at such flights of fancy. She is interested in the effect her work has on me but, to be frank, she regards it as far more positive than my reaction would suggest. 'It is about making people think of the possibility of disaster,' she says. 'Of what could happen, of what might happen. But it's also about suggesting possible solutions to problems. The work acts as a warning, but the materials I use suggest that it is also functional, operational.'

Does all this hardware give her



ideas, or does she have ideas and then look for suitable items to recycle and transform? 'It works both ways. The lots are huge at the auctions where I pick it up, so I have no choice when it comes to how much I buy. Sometimes, I wake up in the night and think, "Oh my God, how on earth am I ever going to get rid of 900 stretchers?"'

Orta is at the Dairy, her main studio is in Paris, because she is in the process of sending new work, and old, to London, where it will appear in an exhibition at the Barbican. Around

her, art students in gloves are packing unlikely looking objects in wooden crates. The atmosphere is one of controlled chaos but Orta is used to this process. Although not especially well-known in Britain, where she was born, in Europe she is hugely in demand, staging at least five shows a year, and turning down many more commissions than she accepts. There are times, she says, when her studio feels like nothing more than a huge production line. 'I have to collaborate, to delegate, to use teams of other people. Otherwise, I would never have any thinking time.'

ORTA BEGAN her career in fashion. She studied textiles at university in Nottingham and, after graduating in 1989, went to Paris to do consultancy work for several fashion houses. In Paris, two things happened. First, she met and married the Argentinian artist Jorge Orta. Second, she began to grow disillusioned with design work. It was the early 1990s, and fashion, like everything else, was in recession. The world, and her own business, felt unstable. She had been assisting Jorge with his work, which is very political, and began to feel that she, too, would like to be more socially active. So she began a series of pieces, 'at the intersection of dress and architecture', that became known as *Refuge Wear* (1992-98).



Clockwise from above: Lucy Orta's M.I.U VII (2003); *Refuge Wear Intervention*, London East End (1998); Lucy Orta Portrait by Jean-François Jaussaud; and *Body Architecture-Collective Wear 4 persons* (1994). Courtesy of the Barbican Art Gallery

'IT'S ABOUT OUR RESPONSIBILITIES TO EACH OTHER. WE MUST WORK TOGETHER TO SURVIVE'



Refuge Wear is clothing that transforms textiles into portable structures, into travelling habitats. These structures come in a variety of forms - from capes to tents - and were often designed with a particular global context in mind, from the crisis in Rwanda to the plight of Kurdish refugees, although, in fact, they work in more than one context.

Last week, thanks to Hurricane Katrina, *Refuge Wear* seemed horribly prescient all over again. Many of her pieces, most famously the *Nexus Architecture Interventions*, in which dozens of people are literally joined



together by their protective suits, bring to mind the residents of New Orleans tying themselves desperately together with lengths of rope. Doubtless she wishes it were not so but, as one catastrophic natural disaster follows another, this feels painfully like her moment.

Orta did not show her work in galleries; she staged 'interventions' in which her 'structures' were worn by local people in the cities where they lived - a backdrop of squats, railways stations, housing estates - hoping that they would penetrate the collective imagination. (There are some striking photographs from this time: a small crowd emerging from the New York subway in bright yellow bodysuits, joined to each other by what looks like an extra 'arm'; 110 French school children all decked out in silver suits, again each one bound to the other by means of a ghostly limb.) At first, the work concentrated on the marginal-

ised individual; she collaborated with the homeless, and created sleeping bags - like the *Ambulatory Survival Sac* (1993) or the *Mobile Cocoon* (1994) - that no bystander could possibly ignore. But over time, she grew more interested in collectivism. 'My work is about our responsibilities to each other,' she says. 'We don't live in isolation. We must work together to survive.' Her constructions grew more complex: sleeping bags that became tents; mobile 'villages'; six stretcher beds stacked high on trailers; equipment for what she called 'urban life guards'.

Later, the work became more political, and more site-specific. At the Venice Biennale, she purified and bottled canal water. For a piece that was shown at the 2001 environment summit in Trieste, she sprayed two Red Cross military ambulances silver. On one side of the vehicles were images representing mad cows and recycling, and on the other, images representing the plight of Rwandan refugees and the lack of drinking water. The two vehicles were parked nose-to-nose in front of the hotel where the ministers from the G8 countries were staying. They are now installed at the Dairy. 'They're beautiful, aren't they?' says Orta, stroking their massive flanks. She hates the idea of art for art's sake, believing it to be nihilistic. But still, she is adamant that her work is art.

'Oh, I'm an artist,' she says. 'The ethical and conceptual aspects of my work are never disconnected from the aesthetic ones.' Her nearest contemporaries are artists such as Kristof Wodiczko and Christine Hill, who have also made works for the homeless; but curiously, the artist she reminds me of most is the sculptor Antony Gormley. Like him, she plays with scale; and she uses her fascination with the human form to explore what it means to be part of a community (or not, as the case may be).

AT THE BARBICAN, visitors will be able to see a new piece of work which consists of 23 silver bodysuits attached to canvas stretcher beds, all of which float mysteriously at waist height, like unpiloted canoes on flood water. It is as dramatic and puzzling as anything she has done. But also on display will be what is possibly my all-time favourite Orta idea: *All in One Basket* (1997), a piece created in response to a story Orta saw on the evening news, in which French farmers were shown dumping tons of fruit onto the streets as a protest against the European Union's agricultural policy. In response, Orta went once a week, over a period of six months, to the old marketplace of Les Halles in Paris with a team of volunteers. There, they gathered fruit and vegetables which would otherwise have been thrown away, and made it into preserves, which were then bottled and labelled. Customers at the market were interviewed, and their responses recorded on video. 'Salvaging fruit, that's for rich people,' said one, who was homeless. 'You need a fridge to keep it in, and an oven to cook it in.'

Orta had already thought of this problem, and had constructed mobile kitchen and refrigeration units crafted from, among other things, a supermarket trolley, so that the jam-making could be carried out on the spot. You can see these units at Barbican, along with the shelves, made from wooden fruit crates, in which the end result of the process was kept (and they will again be in use, cooking up discarded fruit, this time from a London market).

Also on display is a mobile dining room in which, on 4 October, seven guests will eat lunch from specially designed Limoges china as they discuss the issues raised by the project (guests will include Harriet Lamb, director of Fair Trade, and Wendy Fogarty, director of the Slow Food campaign). For Orta, this will be the 23rd meal in a long series; on a nearby wall, you can see the china used in the others (new plates are produced for each 'ritual'). There is nothing beautiful about *All in One Basket*. But it is such a humane idea, so prudent and yet so bountiful; who cares if, away from the market, it has illusions of grandeur? 'Here's our plum jam,' says Orta, picking up a jar. It looks dark and sweet and good enough to eat. Lucy Orta, 15 September-30 October, The Curve, Barbican, London EC2