

# LUCY + JORGE

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# ORTA



La canicule, the ‘dog days of summer’—named for Canis Major, illuminated by the star Sirius high in the August sky—arrived in France in June last year, deepening the country’s drought conditions and straining agriculture. Meanwhile, grave consequences of the ‘flood of the century’ on the Guadalupe River overwhelmed my family in Texas. Yet, events like these, while heightening awareness of the increasing environmental and human toll of climate change, do not mean an acceleration of political solutions. To the contrary. In the face of ecological catastrophe, individual and local initiatives remain a veritable lifeline. As Lucy + Jorge Orta demonstrate, every landscape is made of individual blossoms, every textile of distinct threads, every social movement of unique bodies and voices. Their committed approach rises from a lifelong concern for the world around them, a form of artistic stewardship that expands contemporary art’s grey space of engaged community action. Originally from England (Lucy) and Argentina (Jorge), the Ortas have called France home for nearly four decades now. In their solo and collaborative practices, the artists weave together their backgrounds in political resistance and fashion design to create a diverse and multidisciplinary body of work that addresses ecological and social crises. Last fall, the duo participated in the British Textile Biennial, the Hangzhou Triennial of Fiber Art, and saw *Migrations & Climate* open at Paris’ Palais de la Porte Dorée. We met at their family’s house in Paris’ 13th arrondissement to talk about their legacy. Leo, the artists’ grown son, joined us. An artist himself, he now tends to the spirit of Les Moulins, the ambitious community project his parents launched on the Grand Morin River just outside Paris. A visionary effort of rehabilitating a series of industrial buildings along the waterfront has developed into a dynamic communal site for social unity and contemporary art—like a playground, Lucy says.





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**Why did you choose France?**

**Lucy Orta:** It didn't happen by chance for either of us. I trained as a fashion designer and had already worked in New York, but I wanted to improve my French. I came for a 'short time' to work as a designer. I arrived with my knitting machine and my portfolio on the Megabus—it was the National Express back then, because the Eurostar didn't exist—and I started to look for work. I first found some in the trend forecasting agencies. Jorge, you would've preferred the US, but France took you in first, is that right?

**Jorge Orta:** Well, I received a scholarship from the French government, and I came for a few

**Do you still collect?**

**Lucy:** Yes, we collect, but we're not systematic. There are pieces everywhere, our own and others by friends and artists that we love. Joseph Beuys is a bit like our grandfather.

**And who would be your artistic grandmother?**

**Lucy:** I really like the work of Suzanne Lacy because she's the grandmother of social art—'socially engaged practice', it was called in the US. I studied her, and she's also a friend. She was a pioneer in the US, and her work was pretty feminist in the beginning, even if I'm not at all a feminist. But I really liked the way she organised her gatherings with the



months. In Argentina, there aren't many scholarships available. I was lucky to get it, and I took the opportunity. In the end, I really liked Paris. I went to the US a few times and seriously thought about moving there, but then when I met Lucy in Paris...

**How did you meet?**

**Lucy:** I met Jorge through his artistic work. At the time, he was exhibiting at the Bastille. I was drawn in by the symbolism in his work and also by talking to him, by his commitment. Honestly, you feel something through the work. I'm a collector; I buy emotion. It was love at first sight.

community. She worked in a difficult context. I'd say it's a lot easier today.

**Leo, did you grow up in this house?**

**Leo Orta:** No, in artist housing provided by the City of Paris in Bercy. It was a complex of 10 studios, with one individual house per artist.

**Lucy:** That's kind of why we stayed in France. The studios provided by the city had a big entrance, a double door to be able to load and unload sculptures and paintings. That was the only front door, so the children had to pass through the studio and then branch off to the stairs leading up to the house. That's what allowed me to have such an intense practice:

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We had the crèche for the children. Leo went to the nursery at three months, Pablo too, and Emily at 12 months because, with the third, I said to myself that I wanted to keep her at home a little bit longer. It helped to free up time so that I could work as both a fashion designer and an artist, because it was a double career path. My design work funded the artistic practice. It really needs to be said: Young women ask me today how I did it, and I tell them it was simply because we were well received. We had this housing support, and also the crèche with trained childcare workers and toys everywhere. And because we had little income, it was all free.



And there were playgrounds in your neighbourhood as well, right?

**Leo:** We had Parc de Bercy, which is more than a playground. There's a big waterfall, sculptures up top, and the skate park, of course. The lakes, grassy stretches we'd run down.

**Lucy:** At the time, we had three children in two bedrooms, an au pair, plus the studio. It was chaos.

Then we were selling pieces, we had more and more orders, so it was time to leave Bercy and leave space for other artists. It turned out that this house was for sale. I visited it and loved it—it was incredible for the family. We saw the potential to grow, to have the studio in

the basement and a studio on the top floor for winter. In the meantime, we found the other studios—the Laiterie [a former dairy], the Moulin de Boissy [a former pulp mill], and the Moulin Sainte-Marie [a former paper mill]. We got the Laiterie when we were on the Boulevard de Bercy. Here we have the sewing and drawing studio because it's very clean. I really like having clean spaces. And Jorge has a painting studio for the winter, because most of our work now is at Les Moulins.

Les Moulins are 25 years old now. All grown up!

**Lucy:** It's been a dream of Jorge's since he was a child.

**Jorge:** We looked around for years! In fact, when I was young, I dreamt of living with friends, a community—a place where we could share a great quality of life. It was in my genes.

**Lucy:** And everything's collective, for the families as well as the assistants. That's important. We invite artists from the US, Japan—all our friends—and we say, 'Come and share this with us. How can we build the future? How do you imagine the Laiterie?' It was always this process of questioning, including for the children that might be there. They had a gigantic room to live in, with tonnes of bunk beds everywhere. It was a really important space, a space for reflection. We spent eight years at the Laiterie.





This page: Refuge Wear intervention in London's East End, 1998. Photography by John Akehurst. © Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP 2026.  
 Opposite and following page: Refuge Wear city interventions, 1993-98. © Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP 2026.





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Refuge Wear intervention in London's East End, 1998. Photography by John Akehurst. © Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP 2026.

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Gradually, other buildings along the river became available, and that's how we ended up at the Moulin Sainte-Marie. Today the project runs along an eight-kilometre stretch of the Grand Morin River, which then enters the Marne, which flows into the Seine. The river becomes the project. We imagine the river, the Moulin de Boissy, as a playground. These industrial buildings have potential; we can bring them back to life through contemporary art.

**Your idea of creating a playground, a public space, in a former industrial site is inspiring.**

**Jorge:** The first priority was the preservation of industrial heritage. But we also had to guaran-

**Leo:** Galleria Continua built a skate park so that people from the region come as well. It's a collaborative effort.

**Lucy:** We do workshops from time to time, and residencies, festivals, events that are designed onsite—the locals make it their own. That's also why it's a collective space, because there are lots of people doing different things at their own scale. There are all these contemporary art actors that coexist. When we presented the project to the town hall, nothing like it existed in Europe at the time—the references were the Dia Art Foundation in Upstate New York, the Judd Foundation in the desert in Texas, Andrea Zittel and her High Desert Test Sites, and Walter De



tee that the place would be stable in the years and decades to come. How do we make sure that tomorrow, if we're no longer around, it doesn't fall into oblivion, into disrepair? That's all part of the planning that we've come up with; we're inviting galleries, artists, and the local council. The part that we've imagined and that we're applying with the local council is the public artwork, which brings the maximum number of artworks to the site. You can't approach them in any old way; once they're there, you can't touch them again. Public art is sacred in France, which helps a lot. I'd still like to have more public artworks so that it's even more solid.

**Maria's *The Lightning Field*.** When artists take over these old factories, it creates something that radiates outward. I think ours is the biggest complex now in France, even Europe.

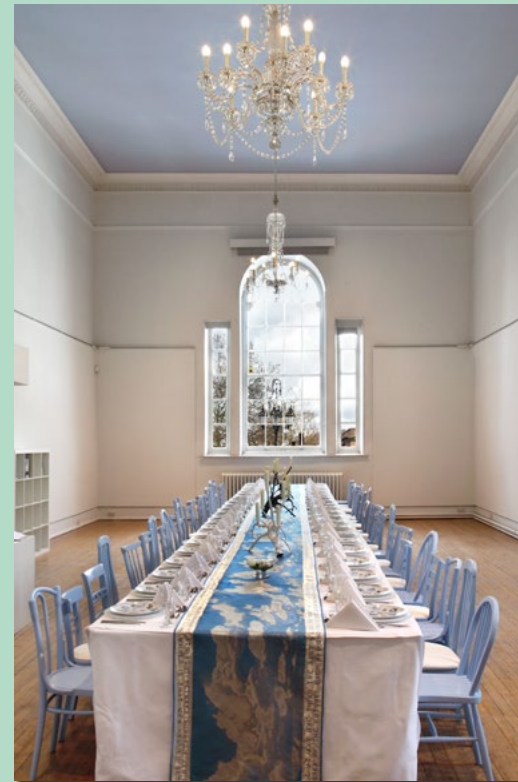
**Jorge:** I have been concerned about the preservation of heritage since I was young; industrial buildings were demolished one after another. No one anywhere really cared about industrial buildings, and I thought they were like the cathedrals of the 20th century. When you see those columns, the overhead cranes, the machinery—they are the memory of the 20th century.

That's also a driving force behind the preservation of these spaces and the desire to give them

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This page: *Connector Mobile Village IX*, Cholet, 2002. Photography by JJ Crance. © Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP 2026.  
Opposite page: A selection of 70 x 7 *The Meal* acts.



a new life, a new role. Leo's the one taking over Les Moulins now, the one who's running it.

**Leo:** To be an artist, you can't just take over the family business, father to son. I can't take over my father's subject matter or his painting. But I can follow in the direction of this heritage and see how Les Moulins can continue to live. That's kind of the idea, right, Dad?

**Jorge:** Yes.

**Your Nexus Architecture works remind me of Lygia Clark's Bichos, the Brazilian artist's interactive sculptures that hinge on participation.**

**Lucy:** The clothing shelters and Nexus Architecture are all close to Lygia Clark, but our

**One of your emblematic works, 70 x 7 The Meal, relies on this idea of transformative participation.**

**Jorge:** The real origin of the project is that constant process of questioning: How do you bring someone into the world of art? How do you attract an audience that isn't into art without scaring them off? Because the art world is closed, it's elitist, these public methods have always interested me.

**Lucy:** It's a desire to communicate everyday life.

When we go to meet a community or someone calls us to set up a meal, we first bring together all the actors and talk about what they'd like to cover or address in the meal. 70 x 7 responds to the needs of the community—the things they



work is different because it's also about social bonds. We would not say that it's concrete art. No, Nexus Architecture is directly related to changes in society. It is a social response. Of course, there is art history. Obviously, we can say thanks to Lygia Clark, who made clothing, gloves, and her therapeutic objects. What is interesting in this history of art is the participation of the other, who transforms the garment or the object. That's very important. But we are doing something different here. The Nexus Architecture works rely on another type of participation. We propose our works, and then we rely on the participants or the community for future possibilities.

want to discover or debate or discuss with other people around the table.

**Jorge:** But the main thing is we don't say that it's a work of art. That scares people. We say that it's convivial, a world that we're building collectively, to get people to join in. Everyone wants to participate in a meal—families, clubs, societies, groups, neighbourhoods. Knowing that it's been like that since the beginning of time, that the most common element in the world is the meal, we say to ourselves, 'Let's take this as a way to pull people into something that everyone can agree on, and we'll see if we can create art from that'. It's an indirect way to arrive at contemporary art.



Horirecycling Enterprise Act II, Wiener Secession, Vienna, 1999. © Lucy + Jorge Orta / ADGAP 2026.



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The surrealist artist Leonora Carrington worked a lot with culinary traditions as well. She saw cooking as a metaphor for social relations and an expression of human needs and passions.

**Jorge:** Absolutely. Of all the popular or social things that we could use, meals are the thing that mobilises people the most.

**Lucy:** They're inescapable in every single country, which means we can multiply the different ways of meeting people across all cultures.

**Jorge:** It's about creating a social bond with these groups for a long time—one or two years, even more. That's why it isn't very different from the textile pieces we've made; it's the same principle. Like a weaver, all these threads

other, which generates another. Afterwards, people take the plate [that we've made specially for the meal] and continue to do this at home.

**And what about your family dinners?**

**Lucy:** Sunday evenings are sacred. Who told you about that, how do you know?

Something tells me the ritual is important at your house!

**Lucy:** We do like to get the family together every Sunday evening, but it's an open table. Whoever can come comes, and it's always a feast. I really like cooking, and I'm a little authoritarian in the kitchen. I don't really let them participate.



relate to each other, and they all come together in the meal. But the meal is the festive element.

**Lucy:** The important part is the process—bringing people in and involving them. We work together with a diverse group of people; we are not the artists. We don't show up saying, 'OK, we're going to do a dinner'. No, it's born of people's needs. The process has to emerge from these encounters. That's why 70 x 7 is generative: seven people invite seven people, who invite seven others. But in fact, we use the metaphor as a symbol: 70 x 7, for us, signifies infinity.

**Jorge:** It's the notion of a chain reaction—one thing generates another, which generates an-

**How would you describe your artistic process?**

**Jorge:** There are two parts to this. The first is living in real time, by which I mean I try to live with the times on a daily basis. It's not like, 'There's this thing, I'll see what happens after a day, maybe I'll do something'. When I was in Argentina, everyone said, 'No, we can't do anything now, the dictatorship is too dangerous'. And in fact, people were still saying the same thing 10 years after the end of the dictatorship. I think we always need to act in the present moment. But that's a personal position, even if it was very difficult and even if I risked my life. The second part is a question of methodological vision with a permanent

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ambition to work on a global scale. Once I left Argentina, I really became conscious of the fact that I live on this planet, and so I feel a sense of responsibility towards everyone on it. I read the newspaper every day, all of it, and I read to know what's happening here, there, wherever. What is the world that I live in today? I'm trying to respond as quickly as possible to that world. It's the poetic reaction to the life that we're given to live.

**Lucy:** We're going to plan, draw, write, but also make plans with scientists or philosophers. It's work that can be collective.

**Jorge:** I remember when I met Lucy, the first homeless people were arriving in the streets of Paris. We hadn't seen that before; no one slept in the streets in Paris. We started to see it around the Gulf War. People who'd lost their jobs, lost their homes, were sleeping outside, and it was so scandalous that we started to work on it with all the emergency shelters. But today, there are so many people, you can almost walk over them. It's always about this reaction to the reality we live every day. I remember the people that year. I remember that there was lots of snow. It was monstrously cold. But today, it's right next to us in Paris. Today, I live what's happening in Palestine and Ukraine and elsewhere as if we were there. I live it constantly.

If there could be one word that defines your approach, what would it be?

**Jorge:** For me, the constant in my life is urgency. A sense of urgency demands a moral obligation. When you see that someone's drowning, you don't just say, 'I don't know, I haven't seen it, I don't have time'.

**Lucy:** You brought up the homeless, and I wanted to add that it's about working with the people concerned. It's not just about bearing witness. I've also done a lot of work with the homeless, the Salvation Army, and I work now with refugees and asylum seekers in England on long-term projects. It's not just to say, 'This exists'. It's also about involving the people concerned. That commitment also comes back to the idea of community. We share and we work together on these big themes, whether it's a student or someone who's with us as a researcher or a refugee. Our work is conceived on the basis of these social facts, on specific needs, but also things that move us. We were talking about social bonds and links to society, and pieces like *Refuge Wear* and *Nexus Architecture* are

in direct contact with social changes. The participation of the other transforms the clothing or the object.

What do you think about current political responses to climate change?

**Jorge:** In France, we tend to think the government has to fix everything: all the social problems of the country, but also global issues. We give a few people the responsibility, and they're the ones who have to do it—but not with our money. Do it, but I don't know how. It's always someone else who has to do it.

**Lucy:** Yes, but the problem of climate change has become so, so immense, and it's difficult to understand how an individual can change things because the scale goes beyond all individual possibility. That's why the subject is complex and very important, and we're not going to solve it alone.

**Jorge:** I'm aware of that, but we need a collective realisation that every small gesture turns into a larger collective gesture. We forget that too easily. 'I leave the tap on, I waste water, because anyway we have a lot of water and it's cheap'. Yes, but what's the result? If three or four billion people do it, the consequences are enormous. I've always thought that, even if no one else acts, you should still do it. We have to develop the capacity for action that we all have.

**Lucy:** Yes, that's why we try to evoke it through our work and through all sorts of projects that we do, like *OrtaWater*, as well as *Amazonia*. Today there are very sophisticated and inexpensive ways of purifying and distributing water. We're gradually trying to make people aware of their responsibility. Things are changing, our behaviours are changing, because there are disasters, floods. We're faced with a huge crisis that we can no longer deny.