

ART

An Antarctic Art Project, Complete With Fake Passports

By JULIE BAUMGARDNER JAN. 14, 2016



Much of the artists Jorge and Lucy Orta's work centers around Antarctica, currently a neutral and nationless political territory. Clockwise from left: "Antarctic Village — No Borders, Dome Dwelling," one of the tents the artists erected when they visited Antarctica in 2007; "Antarctica World Passport Delivery Bureau, Palais Iéna Paris," 2012, a version of the installation from which they offer visitors mocked-up Antarctic passports; "Antarctica World Passport Delivery Kit," 2008-2009.

Left: Thierry Bal; top right: Bertrand Huet. All photos courtesy of the artists.

For more than five decades, the South Pole has remained free of any one nation's rule; rather, under the Antarctic Treaty, which includes signatures from 53 nations, Antarctic territory is a demilitarized, nuclear-free, neutral zone. Or is it? "Antarctic Flag," a work by the artists Lucy and Jorge Orta that was first unveiled during their 2007 expedition to Antarctica, stands as a symbolic bricolage of the territory's supporting nations and their shared values — but also raises the question of whether peaceful coexistence there is sustainable. The partners and artistic duo, also referred to as Studio Orta, based in France and internationally recognized for their socially mindful practice, are all too aware of potential danger in the region. Come 2048, a 1991 agreement protecting what lurks beneath the ice there — oil, coal and kimberlite (thus, maybe, diamonds) — will be open for review, and it's unclear to what lengths some nations might compete to have sole ownership.

For their first-ever New York exhibition, at the Jane Lombard Gallery this month, the Ortas are bringing to the U.S. the series of social sculptures created for their 2007 expedition. “We don’t want the work to be hermetic; it’s communicating,” Lucy says. The sculptures mainly stem from their series “Antarctic Village,” commissioned for the End of the World Biennale that same year: for the project, the pair stitched and constructed 50 tentlike domes, then placed them across Antarctica’s continent. And the focal point of the exhibition is a social practice project titled “Antarctica World Passport Delivery Bureau,” which is what it sounds like: an office issuing passports whereby citizens pledge to uphold “the inherent dignity of every member of the human race,” as it states in their documentation. Anyone may apply — so long as they agree to “a universal citizenship based on the ideals of the peaceful treaty,” as Lucy explains. “There are obligations, like agreeing to protect the environment, take account for my daily footprint and agree to help people in distress, take care of global warming.” She says she hopes the project will inspire real nations to cooperate “for the betterment of humanity.”

Since 2008, the Ortas have printed 55,000 physical documents, in multiple languages that come complete with a stamp. Gallery-goers can apply for citizenship in person during the show at Lombard, and those not based in New York can **sign up online** — so far, more than 12,000 people have been granted virtual citizenship. “It’s an art project, if ever we’re questioned,” says Lucy, on the topic of whether the project has any official governmental implications. “We’ve imagined the idea. There’s no end to where we can take our passport office!”

“Antarctica” is on view through Feb. 20 at Jane Lombard Gallery, 518 W. 19th St., New York, janelombardgallery.com.