

Artists Lucy and Jorge Orta relish their roles as creative agents for social awareness and change. Since founding Studio Orta in 1993, the Paris-based husband-and-wife team has produced an extensive body of work that addresses universal concerns of community, shelter, migration, and sustainable development. Beyond merely tackling these issues artistically, their work suggests solutions by modeling fresh approaches to social dilemmas. From reclaiming discarded food for town-wide dinner celebrations to staging an international exhibition in Antarctica, their often-playful projects incorporate elements of fashion, art, and architecture, which they combine with performances, multimedia events, and public debates. Featuring hundreds of photographs of recent works, *Lucy + Jorge Orta: Food Water Life* includes texts by curators Zoë Ryan, Ellen Lupton, Judith Hoos Fox, and Ginger Gregg Duggan and an interview by critic Hou Hanru that provides insights into the artists' processes and motivations.



LUCY + JORGE ORTA

FOOD - WATER - LIFE

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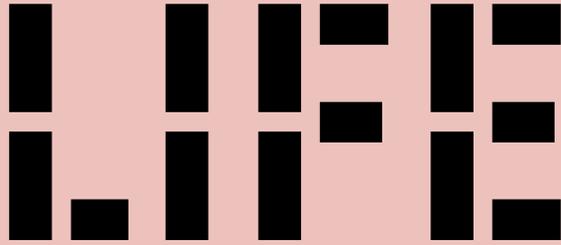


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**Subject = Object:
*Antarctic Village—
No Borders***

Judith Hoos Fox
and Ginger Gregg Duggan

Because Lucy + Jorge Orta's *Antarctic Village—No Borders* body of work marks two distinctly new directions in their way of working, our understanding of their practice needs to shift. The Antarctica project represents on the one hand, a move toward a more specific subject, and on the other, a more abstract object. While still absolutely linked, the relationship between subject and object has expanded, making room for our participation.

Subject

The Ortas' collaborative endeavors are typically driven by their research into subjects that are not geographically circumscribed, but rather, touch all of us. They are concerned with conditions that define survival, such as the availability of food—642 million people in Asia and the Pacific Islands are hungry, as are 265 million in sub-Saharan Africa—and the diminishing supply of water—more than a billion people lack access to clean water, and that figure is growing exponentially.^{1,2} With *Antarctic Village—No Borders*, Lucy + Jorge Orta turn their humanitarian and artistic efforts to a specific geographic location as an emblem for issues there that are, in fact, global. Antarctica, oxymoronically, provided fertile ground for their first body of work generated by a specific location.

The preamble to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty introduces us to this unique place:³

Recognizing that it is in the interest of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue for ever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of international discord;

Acknowledging the substantial contributions to scientific knowledge resulting from international cooperation in scientific investigation in Antarctica;

Convinced that the establishment of a firm foundation for the continuation and development of such cooperation on the basis of freedom of scientific investigation in Antarctica as applied during the International Geophysical Year accords with the interests of science and the progress of all mankind;

Convinced also that a treaty ensuring the use of Antarctica for peaceful purposes only and the continuance of international harmony in Antarctica will further the purposes and principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations.⁴

The treaty elaborates through fourteen additional articles that Antarctica is to be a place free from weapons, nuclear activity, and military presence. Scientific investigations undertaken there will be collaborative in both process and in the sharing of results, and should there be disputes, article IX notes:

Those Contracting Parties shall consult among themselves with a view to having the dispute resolved by negotiation, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement or other peaceful means of their own choice.

The treaty has forty-eight member nations, from Argentina to Venezuela, the most recent joiner being Monaco in 2005. Scientific experiments conducted in Antarctica range from the investigation of ice as a radio-frequency radiator to the protection of marine life. Studies on the effects of isolation on the population of researchers—sequestered there for months at a time, across 4.5 million square miles—have also been conducted.⁵

This international community—not defined by divisive political borders, but dedicated to learning about, and hopefully arresting, the deterioration of the planet—inspired the Ortas to launch *Antarctic Village—No Borders*, and the artists have created a vocabulary of forms that expresses the values and aspirations embodied in this to-date-successful experiment. Antarctica becomes the synecdoche for collaborative human existence defined by freedoms rather than restrictions. A similar approach to content through subject can also be seen in the Ortas' *Fallujah* project, lasting from 2002 to 2007, and in *Amazonia*, a new body of work in development based on their 2009 expedition along the Madre de Dios River—a tributary of the Amazon, the second-longest river in the world—from its source in Calillona, Peru, to its mouth in northeastern Brazil.

Object

It is the zone of frisson between theater and life, object and metaphor, that the Ortas' collaborations singularly occupy. With roots in the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys—a notion ratified by the numerous works on paper, editioned objects, and posters announcing performances by Beuys that fill the walls of the artists' Paris home—the trajectory of their practice brings us into new and important territory. First, the objects they create are arresting, powerful, engrossing, and evocative. In terms of manufacture, they are designed and engineered to meet any industry's standards. In contrast with Beuys's monotone, cerebral objects, Lucy + Jorge Orta celebrate color and texture; bring together found and fabricated objects; re-create two-dimensional images (such as photographs) in three-dimensional forms; and have even used sound as part of their sculptural pieces. Theirs is work that embraces the public, invites participation, and incites thought and action. The social intervention aspect that defines Lucy's own practice and the architectural ambition of Jorge's support each other. But the defining point in the Ortas' work is that here, metaphor and actuality merge, and subject becomes object. Sculptures about the purification of water in fact

purify water, and pieces about the scarcity of food and wanton waste are actual stations for food preparation. And this is unique.

More often, the objects made by performance artists are remnants, reminders: Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage's 1951 work *Automobile Tire Print*, the snapshots of Allan Kaprow and Vito Acconci acts, the videos of Yoko Ono's performances. The nearest precedent for this subject/object conflation might be Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks*—initiated in 1982 at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany—which began as a pile of as many basalt posts, dwarfing the entry to the Museum Fridericianum. Beuys led the effort to plant seven thousand trees in Kassel over the next several years, and a basalt post was placed by each tree. With the planting of each tree, the war-flattened city grew more verdant, and the mountain of stone on the lawn in front of the exhibition hall diminished. This project was to be the beginning of a worldwide environmental effort. More common today, in our increasingly meta world, is the web-based project *Joseph Beuys' 7000 Oaks*, created by Eva and Franco Mattes in 2007.⁶ Here, the basalt posts—images of them, that is—are heaped on the Goethe-Institut's island site in the virtual-reality world of Second Life, ready to diminish as Second Life participants “plant” trees across that alternate and imaginary world, a conceptual greening of the globe. This is a good idea, maybe, but more than ideas are needed.

With the Antarctica project, the connection between object and action is more amorphous, less specific, than in the Ortas' water and food works. For instance, when we scrutinize the project's huts, called *Dome Dwellings*, we see that they are not actually habitable, and the piece's *Drop Parachutes* function as symbols rather than tools. The artists' description of the project opens with statistics that draw a vivid picture of this place:

Antarctica, *the end of the world*: boasting the most hostile climatic conditions, the coldest place on earth with temperatures reaching -80 °C in winter, the largest frozen desert in the world, containing 90 percent of the world's ice (approximately 70 percent of the world's fresh water), no permanent human residents, and no indigenous population.⁷

The contrast between the Eden-like mandate for the place and its extreme geography is reiterated in all the work that comprises *Antarctic Village—No Borders*. Some fifty domed habitats—or more accurately, emblems of habitation—populate white, sheer sheets of Antarctic ice pack, each tent made from the flags of the member nations of the Treaty. Garments and gloves are joined to their surfaces, which also hold silkscreen-printed texts that state, “Everyone has the right to move freely and circulate beyond the state borders to a territory of their choice.” Also stenciled is the Ortas' proposal for a new article to the United Nations declaration.

Encampments of these domed structures are situated sequentially at four locations across the continent. The artists' log describes the harsh weather conditions: "South Village—lat.64°14' south, long.56°37' west, visibility 100 to 900 meters, with snow and haze. Temperature -9 °C with 12km/h winds. The first day of sufficiently clement weather for the operation." Encampments followed at North Village, then East Village and West Village.⁸ The tents embody freedom of movement, the crossing of borders that are so often artificially imposed and politically driven. Those without a country—marooned in the wrong place—need moveable shelters, and above all, the right of free passage. The tents' vivid colors against the whiteness and their notion of home in such inhospitable surroundings are some of the clashing elements that define *Antarctic Village—No Borders*.

When picked up by the arctic winds, the gloves attached to the tents flap and flutter, appearing either to reach out to make contact or to poignantly signal that help is needed. Both readings make sense. Auguste Rodin explored the power of gesture—how even if it isolated, it is eloquent. Before him, Michelangelo depicted the reaching and near touching of hands to great symbolic effect. The Ortas provide an updated exploration. The hand—and by proxy, the glove—is a loaded image, a symbol for what separates mankind from the animal kingdom, as a user of tools in need of human connections.

Drop Parachutes and *Life Line—Survival Kit*, two major parts of the overall body of work, incorporate dueling points of view: help is urgently needed / help has arrived. Their merging of flags with text, as was done on the tents, continues the litany of our quest to survive, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Laden with the tools of survival—some addressing the need for water, others for food, children's toys for comfort, clothing, or medical supplies—*Drop Parachutes* and *Life Line* signal urgency and emergency. Oddly, the parachute and life saver are not common images in art, even though the tension between being aloft and aground, and the many plausible readings of these opposites, would seem fruitful images for artists.

Staked into the ice, a wind-ruffled flag "destined to become the flag of the planet and the human beings it represents, to be raised as a supranational emblem of human rights," marks this remote place as one that could represent the future.⁹ The artists took the flags of numerous nations and bled their distinct designs together, creating a pattern that speaks of international cooperation, a world where borders are soft.¹⁰ Lucy + Jorge Orta called this flag the *Métisse Flag*, in reference to the French term *métissage culturel*—a consciously chosen mixing of cultures—which has no precise English translation, perhaps because the concept is largely foreign to us.

Symbol

Heads or Tails, Tails or Heads is a series of soccer matches launched by the Ortas that opened and concluded their expedition. Meteorologists, paleontologists, and geologists from the Marambio Antarctic Base played an "all nations" match wearing team shirts made by the artists. Each shirt's front was made from one country's jersey, and its back came from another, making it impossible for the players to decipher offense from defense, their own team members from their adversaries. Jorge Orta comments, "This match mirrors human behaviour. Appearances are often deceiving. Someone we think is a friend may actually be playing against us, while a total stranger can surprise us with an act of solidarity. It is not appearances that count, but rather decisive actions in critical moments. We hope that our voyage to Antarctica and the spirit of cooperation that we gained here will generate greater awareness to the plight of refugees across the world."¹¹ These Antarctic games are in the spirit of the soccer matches staged by Sir Ernest Shackleton when, during the winter of 1915, his expedition was marooned on Antarctic ice, just a day from their destination. These games were part of Shackleton's successful efforts to maintain the morale of his crew. The first *Heads or Tails, Tails or Heads* game occurred en route to Antarctica, in Ushuaia, Falkland Islands. England played against Argentina, in remembrance of a disingenuous, two-and-a-half-month 1982 conflict between the two nations that claimed nearly one thousand lives, yet resulted in no actual changes in the governance of the British-dependent Falklands.

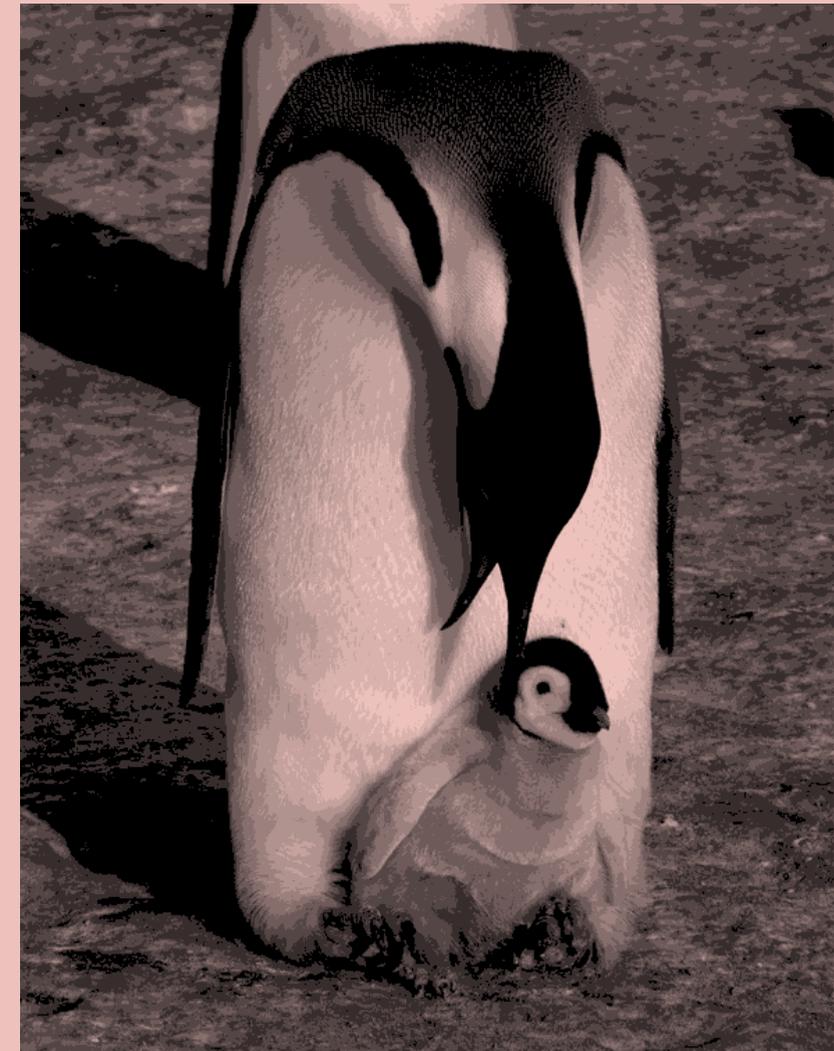
The foundation of *Antarctic Village—No Borders* is the *Antarctica World Passport*, an object and effort that began in 1995 and will continue until it culminates at the United Nations.¹² The first edition of the *Antarctica World Passport* is a symbolic proposal for a new nation of humanity. The passport may be issued to any person wishing to become a citizen of this continent, allowing them to travel freely throughout the world, but the artists request in return that each citizen take responsibility for their actions. The new world citizen will dedicate him- or herself to combating acts of barbarity, fighting against intimidation and poverty, supporting social progress, protecting the environment and endangered species, safeguarding human dignity, and defending the inalienable rights to liberty, justice, and peace in the world. The *Antarctica World Passport* recognizes the inherent dignity of every member of the human race, and supports an amendment to Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—*Art. 13:3*: "Every human being has the right to move freely and cross frontiers to their chosen territory. Individuals should not be deemed of an inferior status to that of capital, trade, telecommunication and pollution, all of which have no boundaries."¹³

Ten thousand numbered and signed booklets, which have all the components of and share their appearance with the standard passport, ensure a grassroots movement. The artists have set up passport office installations for the distribution of these documents, and the recipients can enter an online database (<http://antarcticaworldpassport.mit.edu/citizens/new>)—conceived in collaboration with Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Visual Arts Program—that will be part of the eventual presentation to the United Nations.

The link between subject and object within *Antarctic Village—No Borders* is more ambiguous than in the Orta’s earlier work, the function less direct in its relationship. The passport symbolizes the significance of this shift, and as the driving idea behind *Antarctic Village*, it highlights the new role that each of us play in the function. The participation of all of us who sign up for and receive a passport is implicit. Yes, we now own a wonderful multiple, but we have also joined a movement. We have signed a pledge. The work of Lucy + Jorge Orta, morally driven, brings art and its viewers into new territory, an arena defined by ethics and action.

NOTES

- 1 According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations’ most recent figures (Oct. 2009) and <http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>.
- 2 <http://www.nature.com/nature/focus/water/>.
- 3 http://www.ats.aq/e/ats_treaty.htm.
- 4 http://www.antarctica.ac.uk/about_antarctica/geopolitical/treaty/update_1959.php.
- 5 <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=has-anyone-ever-done-scie>.
- 6 <http://0100101110101101.org/home/reenactments/performance-beuys.html>.
- 7 Lucy Orta and Ann Marie Peña, “Antarctic Village—No Borders,” *The Hub: University of the Arts London Research Journal* (Mar. 2007), 14–18.
- 8 Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, ed., *Lucy + Jorge Orta: Antarctica* (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2008), 104–5, 109.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 124.
- 10 The term “soft borders” comes from Julie Mostov’s book *Soft Borders: Rethinking Sovereignty and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- 11 Orta and Peña, “Antarctic Village—No Borders.”
- 12 *Antarctic 2000, Land of Welcome-Transparence* (Paris: Editions Jean Michel Place, 1996), 120.
- 13 Orta and Peña, “Antarctic Village—No Borders.”









**Antarctic Village—No Borders,
Métisse Flag**, 2007. Installation at FRAC
Lorraine, Metz, France



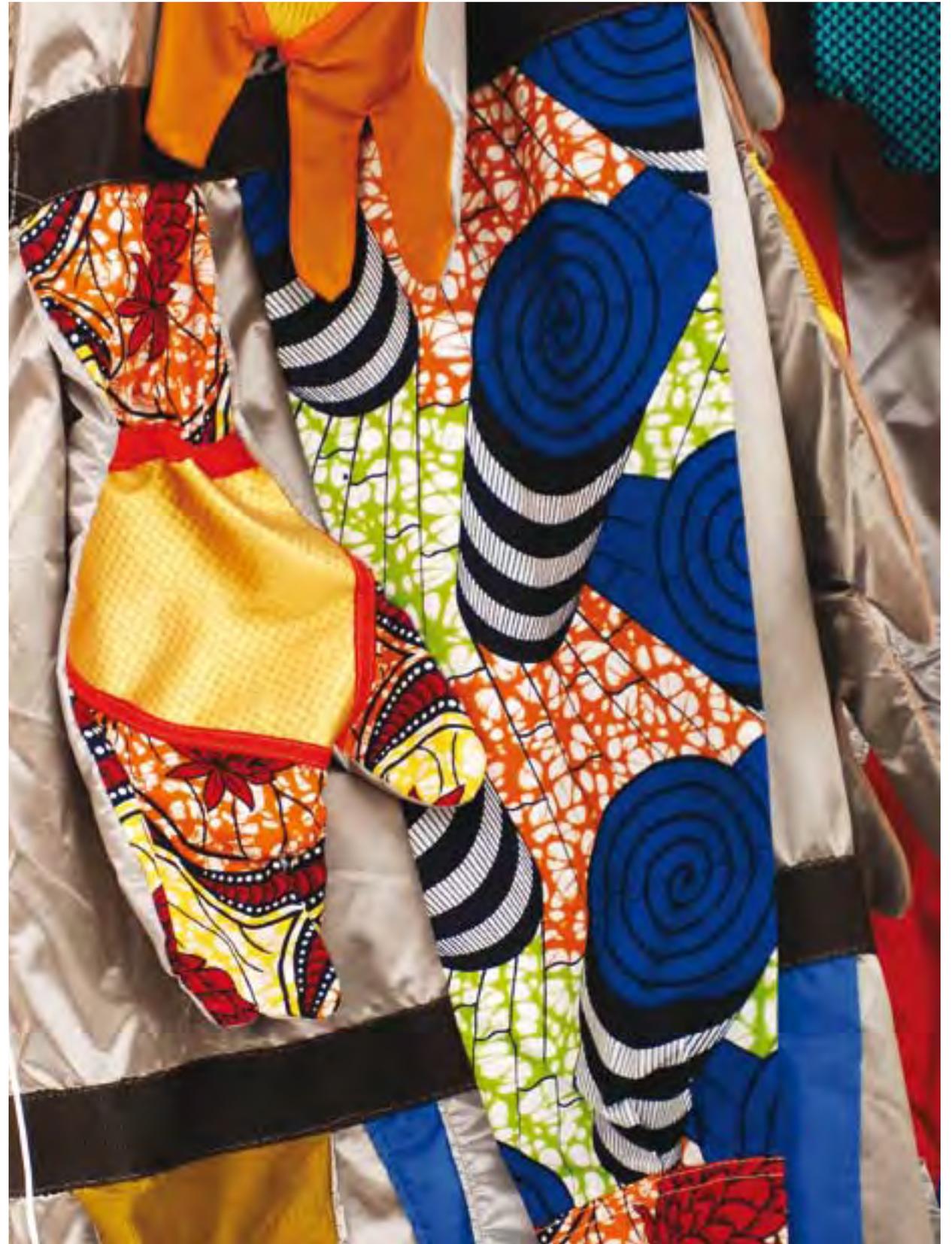


Antarctic Village—No Borders, Dome Dwelling, 2007

Antarctic Village—No Borders, Dome Dwelling, 2007



Antarctic Village—No Borders, Dome Dwelling, 2007

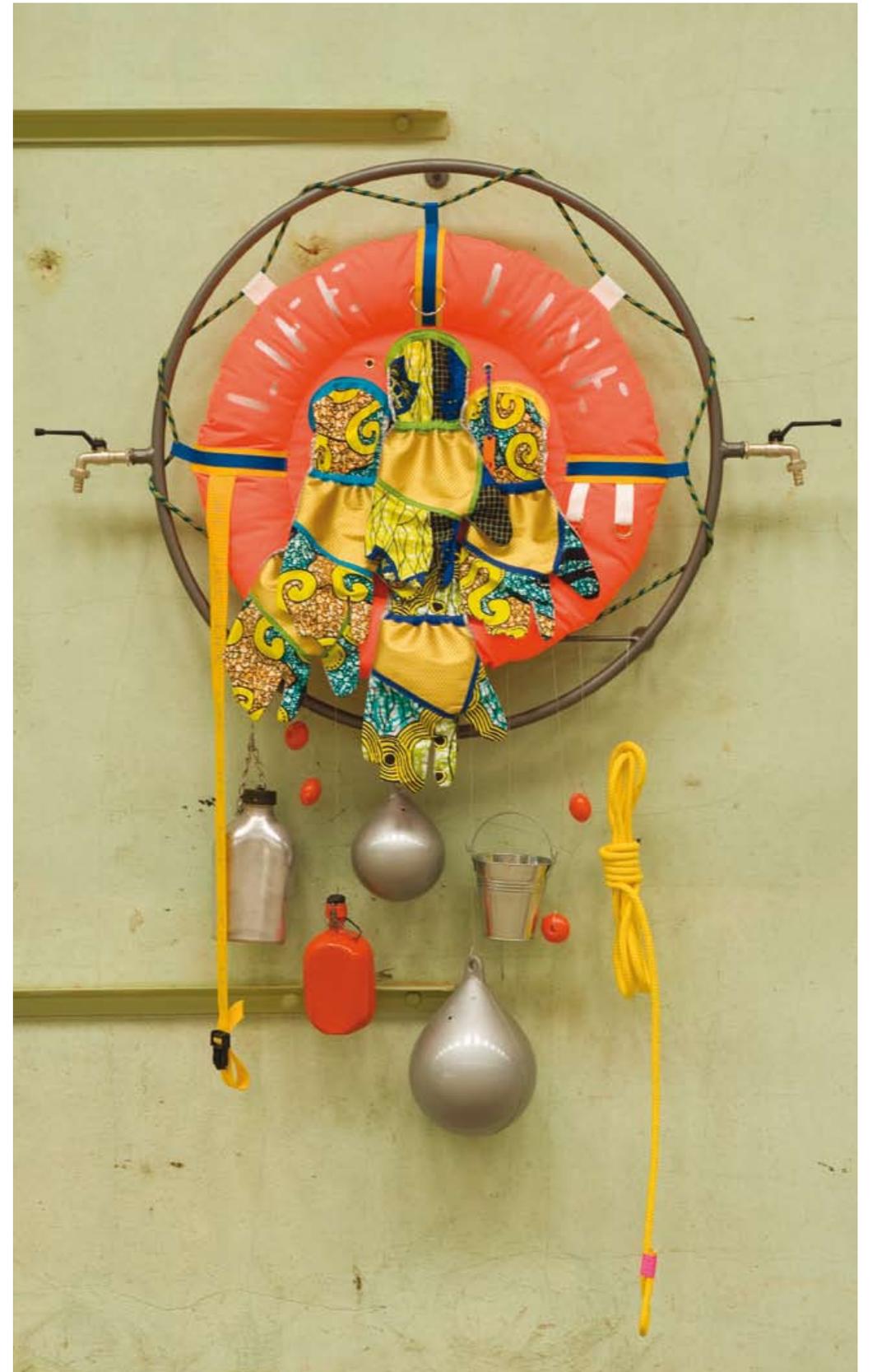




Antarctic Village—No Borders, 2007



Life Line—Survival Kit, 2008



Life Line—Survival Kit, 2008



Life Line—Survival Kit, 2008



Life Line—Survival Kit, 2008-9



Antarctic Village—No Borders, Drop Parachute, 2007



Antarctic Village—No Borders, Drop Parachute Survival Kit, 2007



Window on the World—Antarctica, 2007–8



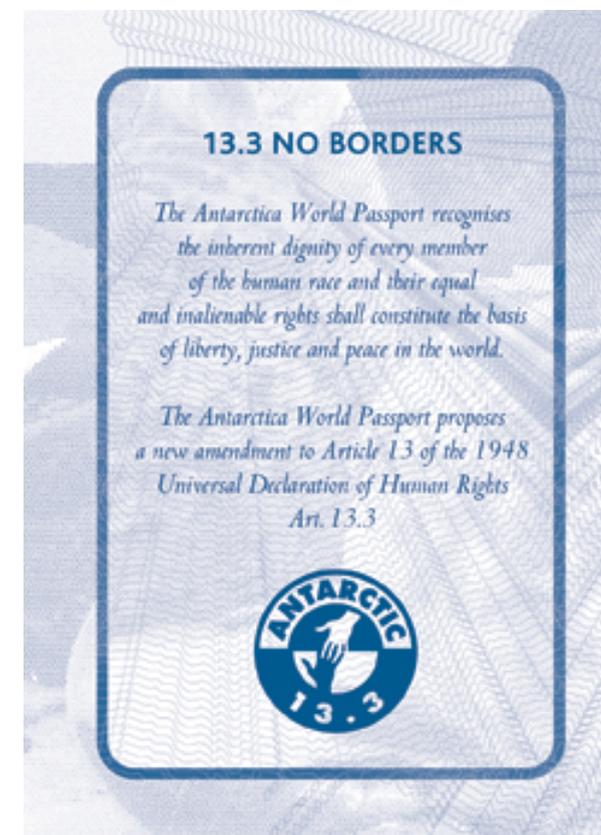
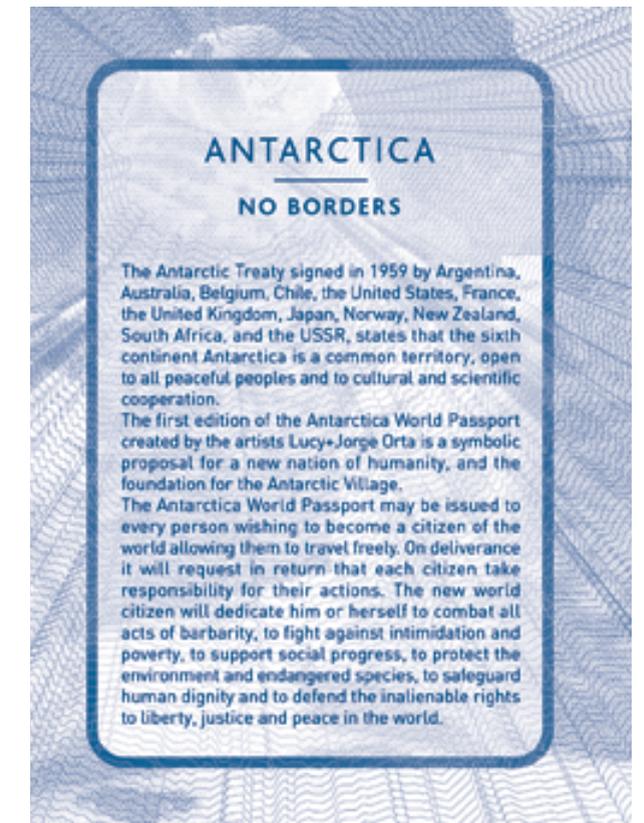
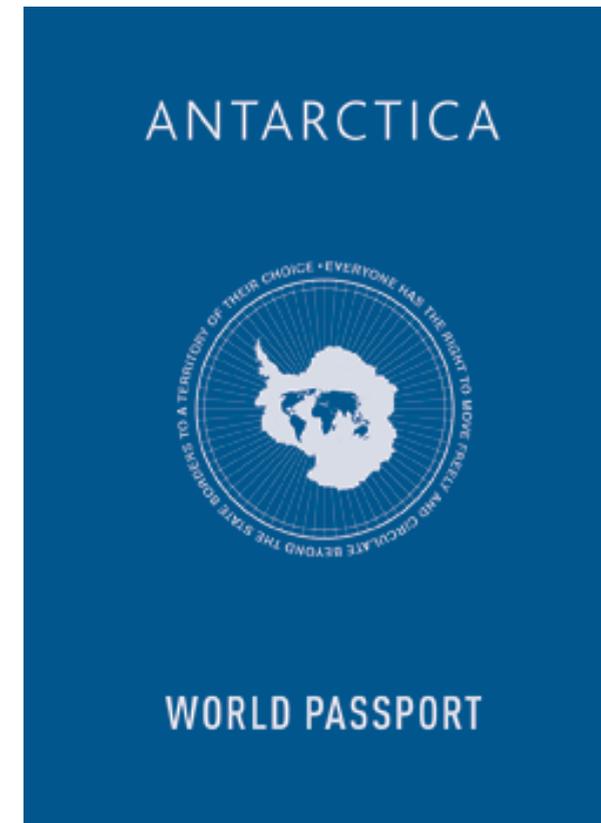
Window on the World—Antarctica, 2007



Window on the World—Antarctic Village, No Borders, 2007



Antarctica World Passport—Delivery Kit, 2008





Antarctica World Passport—Mobile Delivery Bureau, 2008



Antarctica World Passport—Mobile Delivery Bureau, 2008



Antarctica World Passport—Mobile Delivery Bureau, 2008

WATER

Life Science: *OrtaWater*

Zoë Ryan

Increasingly, Studio Orta has focused their practice on environmental concerns. “We look to tackle issues not being addressed as much as they should be,” asserts Lucy Orta. The social and environmental challenges facing the Earth’s natural water resources has continued to be a topic of discussion in their work. The life-supporting properties of water need not be explained—it is one of the world’s most valuable resources. However, water has become a subject of much debate and concern in recent decades as natural resources are being rapidly consumed. Although water covers about two-thirds of the Earth’s surface, only 3 percent of this amount is freshwater, and about two-thirds of that is ice. Much of the remainder is locked underground.¹ Therefore, a mere fraction of a percent of the Earth’s water supports all life on land. Water is also an issue for underprivileged communities. The statistics are staggering: it has been estimated that about a billion people still do not have access to clean water across the globe.

Much of the Ortas’ work is driven by issues of survival and safety, and for that reason water has been as a subtext for many of their projects, including *70 x 7 The Meal*, *HortiRecycling*, and *Antarctic Village—No Borders*, a recent project where Jorge Orta and a team of photographers and filmmakers trekked to this remote area of the world, where the problem of climate change is increasingly giving cause for serious concern. However, in *DrinkWater*, the exhibition they devised for the fifty-first Venice Biennale in 2005, the issue of water took center stage. An invitation by the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, a contemporary art center along the Grand Canal in Venice, to develop a new body of work—*OrtaWater*—seemed the ideal setting for a project that dealt with water. Together with students from Fabbrica—a research center in Treviso, Italy—Studio Orta developed a series of interactive works exploring water purification, distribution, and consumption.

Envisioning a time when freshwater might be so scarce that we would need to develop new solutions for extracting, cleaning, and processing it from our local waterways, Lucy + Jorge Orta took advantage of the waterside setting of the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and utilized its galleries almost like a factory. They set up a small production plant that pumped water from the Grand Canal into a purification system developed by Italian engineers, which used a kit-of-parts of ideas drawn from earlier works, such as the process units for *HortiRecycling*, as well as newly developed elements. The result was a complex network of tubes, containers, and pumping mechanisms, all of which alluded to and made visible the process of water extraction, storage, cleansing, and distribution. As part of the project, the water from the canal, once cleaned, was bottled and distributed to gallery visitors in specially created, reusable glass bottles. A souvenir edition of the project, the bottles also made reference to the privatization of many of the world’s freshwater sources.

In addition to developing the water purification plant in Venice, *OrtaWater* was later tested out again in Rotterdam, at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, with water filtered from the adjacent Amstel River. Here, Studio Orta worked with students from the Willem de Kooning Academie, the Delft University of Technology, and the Design Academy in Eindhoven—all schools in the Netherlands—to generate research projects that would provide real data about water shortage and waste. In a section of the gallery, metal water gourds—some pierced with holes as a metaphor for water waste and loss—were stamped with bar codes that visitors could scan to access information, including statements from world leaders such as Kofi Annan (“Water is likely to be a growing source of tension and fierce competition between nations, if present trends continue, but it can also be a catalyst for cooperation.”) as well as horrifying predictions (“By 2050, the number of countries facing water stress or scarcity could rise to 54, with their combined population being 4 billion people—about 40 percent of the projected global population of 9.4 billion.”)

Although much of the Ortas’ output is ephemeral (performances, interventions, and installations) and lives on through photography, film, and video, there is a body of materials (objects, sculptures, and drawings) generated for each project that is equally essential, acting as both independent artworks but also as extensions to their installations and events, as symbolic signifiers of the issues at the heart of their work. Rather than serving as stand-alone components, these elements form part of an integrated system, a chain of works that build on one another, strengthening their ideas. At once representations of the conceptual thinking behind a project, they are nonetheless plausible solutions made apparent by their functional properties. For *OrtaWater*, for example, Lucy and Jorge generated a series of objects incorporating visual elements drawn from throughout their oeuvre that were embedded with issues relating to survival, safety, security, and the necessity for transportable solutions that can reach communities in need. They included *Urban Life Guards*—wearable garments hung with metal flasks or attached to stretchers and life preservers—as well as *Mobile Intervention Units*, made from bicycles, canoes, even several Piaggio Ape 50 three-wheeled vehicles, and equipped with plastic jerrycans, buckets, sinks, and water pipes. Crafted from found and customized objects, these pieces had a do-it-yourself quality that demonstrated how we can all contribute on some level, however small, to issues of global concern with home-grown solutions. The Ortas assert that their work is founded on a belief that “the individual creative potential of people needs to be fully acknowledged. By recognizing this potential and harnessing it through our work, we aim to mobilize an increasingly wide audience in actively supporting and providing solutions to world problems, whether they are ecological, political, humanitarian, or economic.”

In addition to the collection of objects, a series of drawings accompanied *OrtaWater* based on the same principles and directives of the objects, and consisted of visual imagery taken from the project’s key themes. These images included water bottles, tricycles, boats, cooking utensils, life preservers, and clothing. Together, these objects represented human effort and participation. Using a lexicon of two- and three-dimensional signs and symbols that are repeated throughout their work, Lucy and Jorge provide a frame or context for their ideas that is readily and universally understandable. These images and objects surpass linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries, encouraging dialogue and debate across a wide range of people. Rather than being explicit or absolute in their meanings, they are purposefully open-ended to encourage interpretation on multiple levels based on their associated parts.

As theorists Carlo Vezzoli and Ezio Manzini have noted, “The preconditions for sustainability [in] our society, and hence the lives of our and future generations, depends on the long-term functioning of the complicated ecosystems that we happen to simply call nature... where neither on a planetary nor on a regional level do human activities disturb the natural cycles more than planetary resilience allows, and at the same time do not impoverish the natural capital that has to be shared with future generations.”² This thinking is at the heart of many of Studio Orta’s projects. What makes *OrtaWater* so relevant is that it addresses an issue of increasing concern to daily life: water. By focusing on this essential topic, an area that is often overlooked or taken for granted, Lucy + Jorge Orta position themselves at the forefront of contemporary discussions, ensuring their work remains a pertinent platform for exploration and debate.

By bringing together expertise from multiple fields as well as several years of research undertaken by their own studio, and by following their now tried-and-tested, multifaceted approach—combining workshops, objects, photography, and installations—Studio Orta make clear their determination and commitment to probing issues of import to people globally. Often labor-intensive, this integrated method of working enables them to create work that is taken seriously on a conceptual level, as well as to suggest credible solutions to issues such as water preservation, distribution, and consumption. Ultimately, what makes projects such as *OrtaWater* stand out is that rather than being a series of individual elements, the combined production of a single project provides a powerful set of tools that helps strengthen their message and contribute to the larger narrative embedded within all of their output: the social and cultural well-being of people worldwide.

NOTES

- 1 <http://water.org/learn-about-the-water-crisis/facts/>.
- 2 Carlo Vezzoli and Ezio Manzini, *Design for Environmental Sustainability* (London: Springer Verlag, 2008), 6.



OrtaWater—Urban Life Guard, 2005



OrtaWater—Barcode, 2005



OrtaWater—Sleeping Suspension, 2005–7



OrtaWater—Sleeping Suspension, 2005–7



OrtaWater—Vitrine, 2006



OrtaWater—Vitrine, 2005



OrtaWater—Vitrine, 2005



Amazonia—Vitrine, 2010



OrtaWater—Glacier Wall Unit, 2005



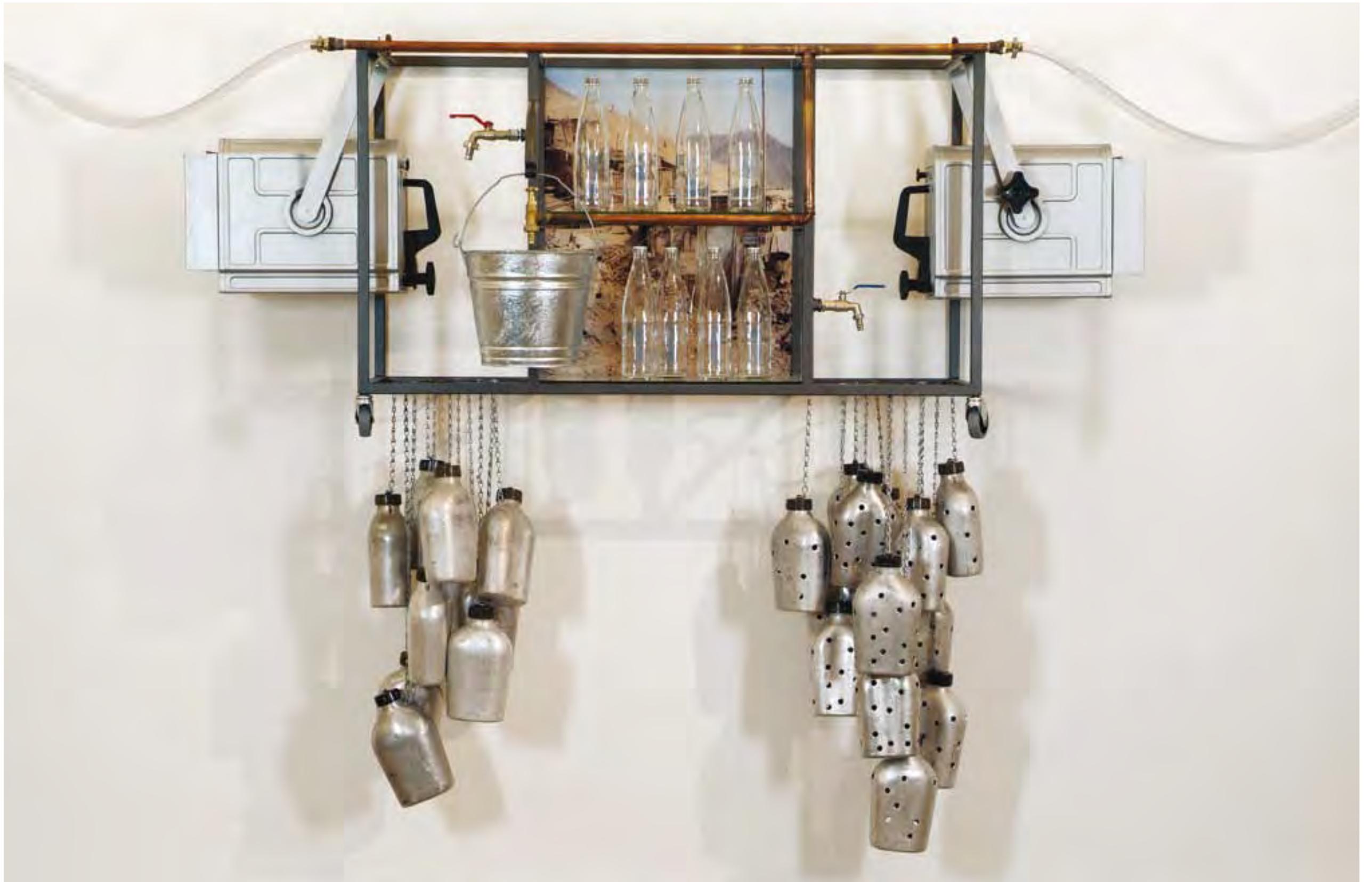
OrtaWater—Life Line, 2005–8



OrtaWater—Life Line, 2005



OrtaWater—Storage Unit, 2005–8



OrtaWater—Light Messenger Wall Unit, 2005



OrtaWater—Exodus, 2007



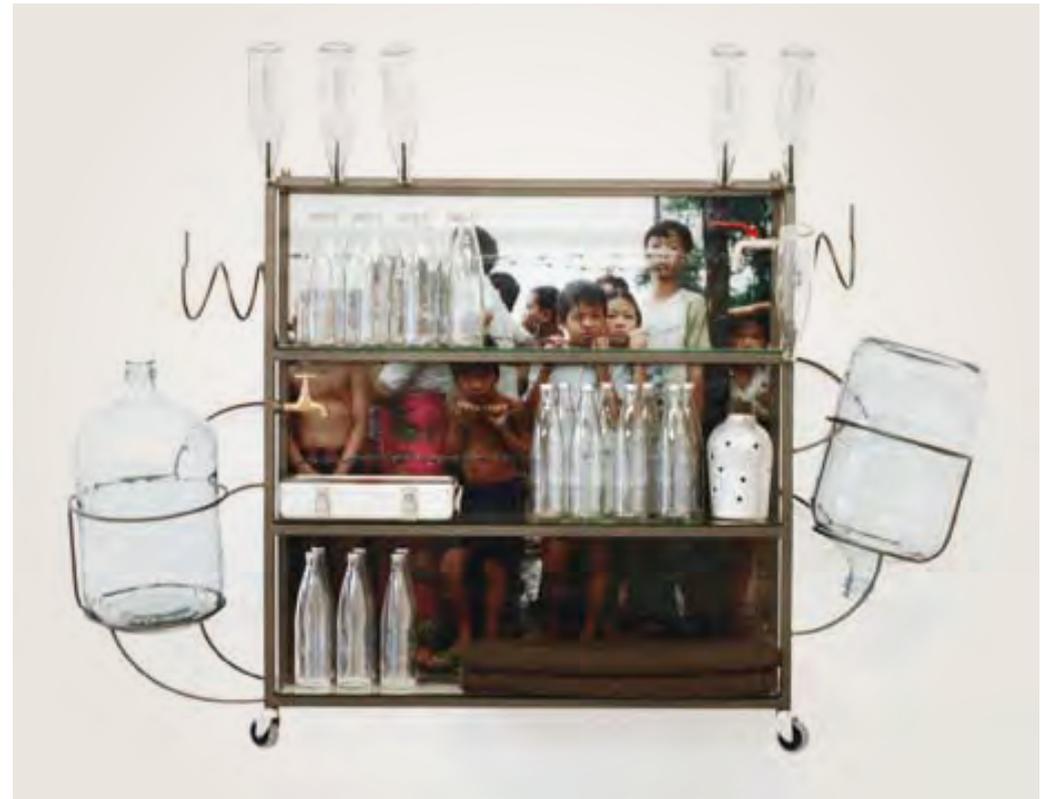
OrtaWater—Bottle Rack, 2005



Amazonia—Window on the World, 2010



OrtaWater—Vitrine, 2005



OrtaWater—Vitrine, 2005-6



OrtaWater—Iguazu Wall Unit, 2005



OrtaWater—Portable Water Fountain, 2005



OrtaWater—Mobile Intervention Unit, 2005



OrtaWater—M.I.U. Mobile Reservoir, 2007





OrtaWater—M.I.U. Urban Intervention Unit, 2005



OrtaWater—Refuge Wear 0816, 2005



OrtaWater—Antarctica Fluvial Intervention Unit, 2005–8





OrtaWater—Fluvial Intervention Unit, 2005

FOOD

Food Service: Setting the Table

Ellen Lupton

Imagine a plain white dinner plate. Printed on the edge is the simple icon of a Red Cross ambulance. If you flip over the plate, searching for a clue or explanation, you will find a full-color press photo showing a scene of displacement, famine, or poverty. One is a portrait of African refugees, their arms burdened with empty water jugs. A thin red crosshair cuts through the image.

The ambulance plate is from a set of seven, produced in an edition of thirty-five in 2002 by Lucy + Jorge Orta for *70 x 7 The Meal*, a series of large group dinners held in public places around the world. The setting, guest list, menu, and plates change from meal to meal, but key elements link the dinners into an ongoing endeavor. Each meal is served on special dishes, some conceived for the event and some borrowed from previous gatherings. A custom-printed fabric runner unifies the banquet tables with a ribbon of color, stretching for hundreds of meters through a cityscape, around a monument, or inside a gallery. Servers wear lime-green, screen-printed aprons. Seven guests invite seven other guests, the group multiplying to populate the scene with people from different social groups: artists, politicians, patrons, farmers, activists, and neighbors. The printed pieces—plates, aprons, table covers—anchor the occasion around a layered language of images and objects. The art lies in the social gathering, pinned into memory by artifacts designed for functions both poetic and mundane.

As a design critic and curator, I am drawn to the collision of ordinary purpose and extraordinary meaning in the work of Lucy + Jorge Orta. In project after project, useful objects mix and propagate to create dynamic assemblies of people, places, and things. Each project channels energy from familiar objects to fuel social experience, trading up the currency of familiarity to change the way we look at everyday life processes.

How does an apron function? At its most basic level, it shields the wearer, protecting the clothes worn underneath. As a social symbol, the apron serves as a uniform, a badge of duty that conveys status and responsibility. It is a unifying mark that ties one event to others.

How does a tablecloth function? Like an apron, its practical purpose is to conceal and protect. Symbolically, it cloaks a plain surface with the trappings of ceremony. At a large group function, it connects a legion of separate tables, unifying space with color, turning many into one.

How does a plate function? Again, like the apron and the tablecloth, it is a membrane of separation between the clean and the unclean. It cradles and divides, protecting the food it holds from the surface underneath. It marks a personal space, distancing people while bringing them together with a shared pattern. A plate conveys messages and meaning using shape, materials, and ornament to speak about taste, history, and custom.

A well-dressed table elevates the status of any occasion, changing how people behave and what they will remember. Table settings transform eating into dining, an orchestrated social ritual. Amplifying the familiar signifiers of decorum, Lucy + Jorge Orta strive to set the table with unexpected intensity. Aprons and runners become banners or flags, vivid beacons that lead the charge rather than holding back in servitude. Dinner plates arrive laden with semiotic abundance: text, diagrams, icons, and voluptuous drawings of hearts and artichokes, symbols of human aspiration that speak to the difficulty, says Lucy, of “reaching the center.”

Leftovers

Lucy Orta started experimenting with food service in her 1996 project *All in One Basket*, for which she gathered discarded produce from Paris street markets to make into pickles and jams. At the end of each market day, vendors throw damaged, unsold fruits and vegetables into the gutters, where they are washed away as refuse. Orta began collecting and preserving this condemned produce, packing her home-brewed concoctions in glass jars labeled with the food’s urban provenance. She displayed these reclaimed foodstuffs in various ways, including in simple wooden boxes lined with dramatic photographs of abundance and waste. In another piece, she used a single eight-foot-long shelf to organize a row of jars into a linear record of the seasons, from cherries in May to eggplants in November.

Seeking to engage audiences more directly, Orta invited a famous Parisian pâtissier, Stohrer, to create jams and purees to share with the public. The project was hosted in 1997 by a small gallery located in a church near Les Halles, formerly the site of a major fruit and vegetable market, now a shopping mall. While the public sampled the reclaimed food products out on the street, the gallery displayed boxed reliquaries and mobile pantries equipped with audio recordings of gleaners Orta had met on the street. Most of these gleaners were poor, while some were students and others were people who simply stopped to pick up food off the ground. Some homeless people dismissed the practice altogether, explaining that gleaning is only for those rich enough to have a refrigerator and a place to keep their found provisions.

Wasted food is hardly unique to Paris. Grocers and street vendors in prosperous societies around the world routinely discard milk, bread, produce, and other foods that are deemed unfit for sale or simply in over-supply. Sellers commonly pulp or contaminate unsold food, destroying it lest it diminish demand for fresher goods. Saving food for those too poor to shop requires a system for collection and distribution—it takes effort to recover value from a bruised apple or a redundant cucumber. The city of Munich provides bins to help vendors salvage and sort refuse, while New York’s City Harvest, a private organization, delivers food from restaurants to shelters

and soup kitchens. For *HortiRecycling*, a project in Vienna, Lucy Orta provided market vendors with brightly colored, screen-printed totes, which served as handy food-recycling receptacles for the vendors while advertising the process as it took place. Lucy and Jorge created mobile kitchens out of shopping carts and utilitarian hardware elements that enabled them to collect, clean, and cook food right on the street when hooked up to water and electricity in the marketplace.

Trigger Objects

As in many Studio Orta projects, *HortiRecycling* and *All in One Basket* yielded a variety of constructed objects—rolling carts, mobile kitchens, and shelves stocked with preserved vegetables—as well as live social engagements. Primitive kitchens appear in other Orta projects as well, including *Antarctica*, an ambitious expedition that used the accoutrements of Antarctic exploration to speak of rootless existence in a not-yet-sovereign territory. *Antarctica* includes a series of parachutes laden with emergency supplies, including a floating kitchen that bears clattering clumps of cooking utensils.

Such physical objects concretize the Ortas’ social activities, serving as physical repositories of events. Each object provides an additional way for people to engage in the process of the work, whether viewing it in a gallery or purchasing it to take home. While larger-scale objects play a role in the collectors’ market and the museum world, Lucy + Jorge Orta’s smaller items are affordable to people who might not otherwise purchase a work of contemporary art. A dinner plate or a jar of pickles offers a lasting memento of an event intended to change perceptions of everyday activities (eating, dining, cooking, shopping).

These simple objects resemble everyday things with everyday functions, while the more elaborate constructions (tents, garments, life jackets, architectural structures) often have little or no real utility, employing forms and materials in excess of what might be needed to complete a task. In an interview with Lucy Orta, curator Nicolas Bourriaud suggested the term “functioning aesthetics” to describe the studio’s work, but she interjected the phrase “operational aesthetics” instead. The French word *fonctionnel* is equivalent to the English word “functioning,” thus bearing connotations of blunt instrumentality and lacking any dimension of poetic surplus and cultural critique. The Ortas’ began using the word “operational” in connection with their ongoing project *OPERATION Life Nexus*, an endeavor that uses workshops and large-scale projects to raise awareness of organ donation around the world. “Opera” suggests a larger collaboration with curators, scientists, technical experts, and others. “Operation” suggests an open process, perhaps with unknown results—a sequence of possible actions rather than a solution to a given problem.

Lucy Orta is often asked if she is a designer. Her answer, insistently, is no. And yet the studio's methodology bears strong affinities with design practice, and Orta is no stranger to the profession. She trained as a fashion designer at Nottingham Trent University and worked professionally in Paris for more than a decade, specializing in knitwear for men. Jorge Orta studied simultaneously at the faculty of fine arts (1972–79) and the faculty of architecture (1973–80) of the Universidad Nacional de Rosario in Argentina. Many of the Ortas' project drawings resemble design drawings, with detailed instructions to be executed by a fabricator, complete with measurements and material samples.

Despite Lucy's strenuous disavowal of the field today, she is a model and inspiration for many designers. She is a professor of Art, Fashion and the Environment at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London, and her work has been featured in numerous volumes on experimental fashion. From 2002 to 2005 she was head of the Man & Humanity master's course at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, where her colleagues included Hella Jongerius and other leading designers. Jongerius, whose projects range from stitched ceramics and soft silicone vases to factory-made dinner plates with built-in flaws and irregularities, seeks to upend expectations about how materials behave. While Jongerius focuses on the physicality of material goods, the Ortas address their social effects. The objects are not ends in themselves, but rather "trigger objects" designed to function as social catalysts, moving people to think and act in new ways about familiar processes. While Jongerius puzzles over the sculptural form a dinner plate, the Ortas treat their dishes as generic blanks. The basic plate form selected for the ongoing 70 x 7 project has no articulated rim, offering up a seamless ground for text and image. As physical objects the plates are elegant but interchangeable; variations result from context and conversation, food and message.

Studio Orta is sometimes identified with "relational aesthetics," a term coined by Bourriaud to describe anti-monumental art practices based in everyday social activities. A key figure for Bourriaud is Rirkrit Tiravanija, who began cooking and serving Thai food inside gallery spaces in the early 1990s, as well as Gordon Matta-Clark, who founded the restaurant Food in 1971. Matta-Clark's legendary meals included *Bones*, a repast consisting of frogs' legs, oxtail soup, and roasted marrow bones. Such works emphasize art's capacity as a publicly consumed, socially shared experience. Studio Orta takes that experience out of the gallery and onto the street (or into the canal, the prison, the natural history museum, or the frozen landscape of Antarctica). The first 70 x 7 meal took place in the French town of Dieuze in 2000. A local youth center wanted to bring together people from the town and asked Lucy + Jorge Orta to participate. A tablecloth, screen-printed by hand in the artists' studio on long rolls

of nylon fabric, snaked through the town, tying together dozens of tables into one vast communal picnic. The event was advertised via newspaper to the village's three thousand residents, and streets were closed to traffic. All guests received tickets entitling them to buy their own dinner plates if desired. Although the organizers initially objected to the idea using and selling real china dishes (too expensive, too difficult), more than 750 plates were sold, attesting to the enthusiasm of the guests and their eagerness to hold on to the experience.

Since then, each meal has pursued its own social and culinary agenda. An event focused on foraging featured *panna cotta* made with algae as a thickening agent as well as a variety of roots and greens gathered from local fields and forests. A dinner held in collaboration with Italy's Fondazione Slow Food focused on the plight of the Andean potato, a threatened staple of Argentina's local economy. Staged in the restored Venaria Reale, a regal palace in Turin, the event featured tables piled with carrots, potatoes, peppers, garlic, celery, zucchini, and more. During the dinner, a team of cooks cut and trimmed the vegetables, packing bags for guests to carry home and make into their own soup.

The most spectacular dinner in the series has been planned and visualized but not yet held: spanning London's Millennium Bridge, the dinner would cross the Thames with a continuous, red-clothed dinner table, linking two halves of the city via a shared meal. After breaching the river, the tables would meander through other public areas, seating upwards of five thousand guests. Commissioned by ixia, a public art think tank in the United Kingdom, the project exists through written plans and carefully simulated photomontages, published in book form as a kind of model or manual for how to conceive and execute a large-scale urban art project.

A Seasonal Practice

While the London dinner party remains, for now, a virtual proposal, most Studio Orta projects are resolutely concrete. The couple's artistic enterprise revolves around a hands-on studio life. In contrast, many artists today work primarily from their computers, arranging the fabrication of pieces via phone and email and relying heavily on galleries to store their work and look after the details of shipping and installation. Although the Ortas' pieces are fabricated in part by specialists in metalwork, porcelain manufacture, and tent-making, most pieces are finished by hand in their studio spaces, which include a reclaimed dairy in the Brie region east of Paris and a small building near their home in the city.

The dairy, built in the late 1900s as one of the first industrial dairies in France, is now the site of a new kind of industry. It serves as a shipping dock, storage unit, and screen-printing workshop, as well as the site for woodworking, plaster casting, painting, and

assembling. One small room in the dairy is stocked with box after box of carefully labeled plates from the dinner series, available for purchase by collectors or for use in future 7 x 70 meals where funds aren't available to produce custom plates. The Ortas are also leading the development of a pair of former paper mills—Moulin de Boissy and Moulin Sainte-Marie, located three kilometers from the dairy—into a state-of-the-art network of galleries, artist studios, a research center, and public parks, giving this rural community a new identity and revived economic opportunities. Meanwhile, the unheated dairy has minimal amenities, making it usable only in warm weather. Thus the Ortas write, draw, and think in the winter and build, print, and assemble in the summer, working with a team of assistants who come and go as the weather changes. Following an intense cycle keyed to the seasons, Studio Orta is a family-run farm whose produce happens to be contemporary art.

The Ortas' public dinners and experimental kitchens coincide with a renewed worldwide interest in the politics of food. Communities around the world—working from the scale of global food networks down to local methods for farming and cooking—are seeking ways to make the food system better serve the needs of people and the planet. After decades of success in the production of massive quantities of cheap food, policymakers and citizens are recognizing the environmental and social cost of this process. The over-industrialization of food has forced small farms to surrender to agribusiness, reduced biodiversity in favor of monoculture crops, and assaulted communities with debilitating chronic diseases. Studio Orta illuminates issues of scarcity and waste while drawing people into a reflective experience of eating, drinking, cooking, and dining. The experience is a collective one, engaging individuals in a public process.



70 x 7 The Meal, act III (The Invisible Touch), 2000

Installation and a series of dinners created from discarded fresh produce from local markets in the Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria
Table set for 14 guests with silkscreen-printed table runner and edition of 490 Royal Limoges porcelain plates



Beech wood box containing seven Royal Limoges porcelain plates



70 x 7 The Meal, act VIII, 2001

Installation to inaugurate *The More Things Change* exhibition for the 51st International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado
Table set for 500 guests with silkscreen-printed table runner and Royal Limoges porcelain plates



70 x 7 The Meal, act XXVII, 2007

Installation and fundraising dinner to support the Medical Foundation for the Care of the Victims of Torture and to coincide with the group exhibition *The Politics of Fear* at the Albion Gallery in London

Table set for 99 guests with silkscreen-printed table runner and edition of 100 Royal Limoges porcelain plates created by Reza Aramesh, Shilpa Gupta, Kendell Geers, Rachid Rana, Aveshek Sen, Xu Bing



70 x 7 The Meal, act XXVIII, 2007

Installation and dinner in the presence of His Serene Highness The Sovereign Prince of Monaco at the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild, to launch the collaboration between the United Nations Art for the Environment Programme and the Natural World Museum

Table set for 50 guests with silkscreen-printed table runner and edition of 100 Royal Limoges porcelain plates



70 x 7 The Meal, act XXIX, 2008

Performance and dinner staged inside the historical Savoy palace of Venaria Reale to launch the collaboration with Fondazione Slow Food per la Biodiversità Onlus in support of the Andean potato research project founded by the Cooperativa Cauqueva in Argentina, soup menu created by chef Alfredo Russo, from Dolce Stil Novo

Table set for 150 guests with silkscreen-printed table runner and edition of 150 Royal Limoges porcelain plates, performance of preparation of basic ingredients for vegetable soup, to be distributed to each guest at the end of the meal



70 x 7 The Meal, act I, 2006

Proposal for open-air dinner in London
Table to be set for an estimated 8,000 guests
with silkscreen-printed table runner and Royal
Limoges porcelain plates





Act IV, 2000



Act III, 2000



Act V-VII, 2001



Act XX, 2003



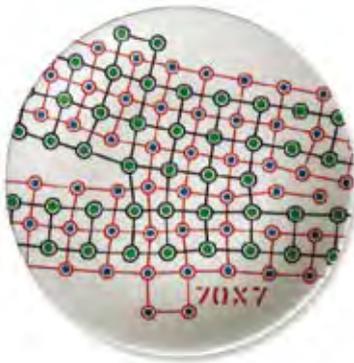
Act XXI, 2005



Act XXII, 2005



Act X, 2001



Act XI, 2001



Act XIII, 2001



Act XXIII, 2005



Act XXIV, 2006



Act XXV, 2006



Act XVI, 2002



Act XVII, 2002



Act XIX, 2002



Act XXV, 2006



Act XXVIII, 2008



Act XXVIII, 2008



HortiRecycling, 1997-2005



HortiRecycling, 1997-2006



HortiRecycling Enterprise, act II—Vitrine, 1997–2008



HortiRecycling—Mexican Kitchen, 1997–2008