

## **If only we wanted to !**

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There are no more excuses. If only we wanted to, we could change our direction overnight and turn fashion into an entirely eco-sustainable system. We could transform its productive system into a perpetual machine capable of allowing us to produce, distribute, buy, use, throw and recycle the same quantity of fashionable “stuff” with the same quality and at the same rhythm, without having to question our life styles, our value systems, our model of wellbeing. If only we wanted to.

But the *Lucy Orta: Survival* exhibition, on show at the London College of Fashion from the 29th September until the 31st October 2008, goes decidedly ahead of this perspective and explains to us that the “sustainable thing” goes beyond the perpetual machine of the ‘Unsustainable Lightness of Being... just Fashion’ and its typical loud-talking-catwalk-language.

Lucy Orta’s language, the language of a distinguished LCF researcher, Professor of Art, Fashion and the Environment, goes beyond academic language. Hers is the language of a major artist that feeds off very different roots of imagination and cultural commitment.

When the language is other, so is the message, as McLuhan teaches us. And in actual fact Lucy Orta’s art works emit, without making any concrete sounds, such strong and inaudibly loud messages they seem to be attempting to crush our ear drums: ... Are You Ready for the Worst ... Peace is Not the Absence of Armed Violence... Truly Passive Existence... No Borders... Free Mobility of People ... Respect...

Lucy Orta’s public and commissioners are not in the world of fashion business nor of the ‘fashionistas’. Lucy Orta comes from the world of art that is dedicated to social transformation and speaks to civil society, to human beings. It speaks to those who have stopped dedicating their own ‘free’ time to consumer traps, preferring to use their ‘freed’ time to engage with art products and culture which talk about concrete experience, which reflects a shared feeling, that are able to transmit – through their own poetical power – that search for existential sense and meaning which our consumer culture has replaced with the ‘need-to-need’ related to material goods.

With her works and installations Lucy Orta presents the civil courage of a vast community of artists who are prepared to work – with her and her husband Jorge Orta – in the field, hands on, among the people, mixing it up in ‘marginal’ communities, sharing experiences with the

'sub'-cultures of those who live beside us, cheek to cheek with our affluent society of wellbeing, yet in a state of on-going emergency and/or discrimination.

The Studio Orta works don't just talk to us about the 'otherness' of who effectively lives in a state of war, of Diaspora, destitution, homelessness, but also about those that live in a state of existential exile, of permanent terror and sense of anthropological alienation that is so common in our modern societies despite living in a so called "advanced civilisation". These are works that make us think about what remains of our western civilisations, based on a capitalist market economy, which after having seduced us with the sex-appeal of a dream of purely materialistic wealth&fun is now helplessly gaping at the disintegration of the economic, social, environmental and I wouldn't mind adding (aesth)etic prerequisites on which it had so mindlessly been based.

But the Refuge Wear, the Drop Parachutes, the Survival Kits, the Urban Life Guards, the metaphoric garments, multiple stretchers and camp beds and Orta's video-installation *Antarctica* take it all a good way further. This time the message is not just a carrier of intelligent and forceful denunciation, it also carries with it a new exciting utopia. It's the discovery of a new world, or maybe, a forgotten landmass: the Antarctic. Orta carries us to that area of our planet, south of the 60° parallel, over which, in 1959, countries representing two thirds of humanity signed the Antarctic Treaty. A treaty that has turned this planet's sixth continent into the only ideal place in the world. A non-place which -perhaps due to its temperatures of - 60 °C is so unfit for human life - has become the only place on the planet that can only be used for peaceful purposes, where any degree of military involvement is prohibited, where there is freedom of scientific investigation and cooperation, where all nuclear energy production, all explosions and all disposal of radioactive waste material is ruled out.

This is where the Lucy + Jorge Orta have founded the Antarctic Village, the first symbolic village of the 'nation of humanity'. A place where a new generation of women and men will have the right to citizenship and, of course, a passport based on an amendment to article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states: Art. 13:3 "Everyone has the right to move freely and cross frontiers to reach their chosen territory. Individuals should not be deemed of an inferior status to that of capital, trade, telecommunication and pollution, all of which know no boundaries."

On receiving such a passport, which will allow each citizen of the new world to travel freely, they will be requested in return "that each citizen dedicate him or herself to fight all acts of barbarity, to fight intimidation and poverty, to support social progress, to protect the environment, and endangered species, to safeguard human dignity and defend the inalienable rights to liberty, justice and peace."

Lucy Orta's work therefore urges us to reflect on our model for human progress and development well beyond the standard parameters which are usual in these times of global economic and environmental crisis. Orta warns us that the issue of sustainability is also

anthropological and cultural, meaning an aesthetic, value based, artistic concern. Because as things stand, it is also our space -our living space in the world we are living in and the planet we are living on- and our time -the 'lived' time and not just the 'consumed' time of our life-time- that is under threat. Our space and our time are also limited and non-renewable resources. They should therefore be handled with care and be viewed as an integral part of all economic, political, social and environmental deliberations.

So what Lucy Orta is getting at, and what her work embodies and heralds, is a true cultural transformation where our objects of desire, and even our everyday gestures become symbolic and cultural stepping stones towards awareness. They point to a deep cultural and social transformation: from the current 'culture of economy' driven by the mythology of quantity, to a new 'economy of culture' based on quality. The quality of everyday objects, gestures and art works that care for the ecology of our minds. And in order to achieve this, all our actions need to be questioned and reviewed, as does the balance between our western lifestyles and our intra-cultural thought patterns, between our affluent unsustainable way of life and a good, fair, and clean distribution of prosperity in the world. A new economy of culture in which culture is no longer an abstract term, it is a network of cultural actors who, like Lucy Orta, can generate and disseminate the kind of communication and education that can reveal the aesthetic side of ethics, and finally allow us to grasp how it really feels to become a citizen of a human nation and a fellow inhabitant of our blue planet.

Those who simply claim that such a transformation is impossible should first ask themselves if the current dogma of senseless unlimited material growth still carries within it the seed of well-being and a prospect for the future. If the answer is negative, a new course of action is needed. History has already witnessed some cultural (and artistic) movements that have dramatically changed the unfolding of time like Christianity, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. All transformations stem from what distinguishes our species from all others: our human mind and spirit.

If only we wanted to, therefore, using all the regenerative power of our mind and spirit we could set this new transformation in motion. It will clearly take time. But we have to start somewhere. As far as I am concerned I have already forwarded my citizenship request to the Antarctic Village and have obtained my World Passport n. 1004. I await, armed with fiery patience, for the day when together with many, many others, we will finally be entitled to show this same and shared document at every national border of this new world of ours.

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