

sculpture

July/August 2013
Vol. 32 No. 6

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org

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\$7.00US / CAN



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BERTRAND HUET, COURTESY MOTIVE GALLERY, AMSTERDAM

Art at the Table

Lucy + Jorge Orta

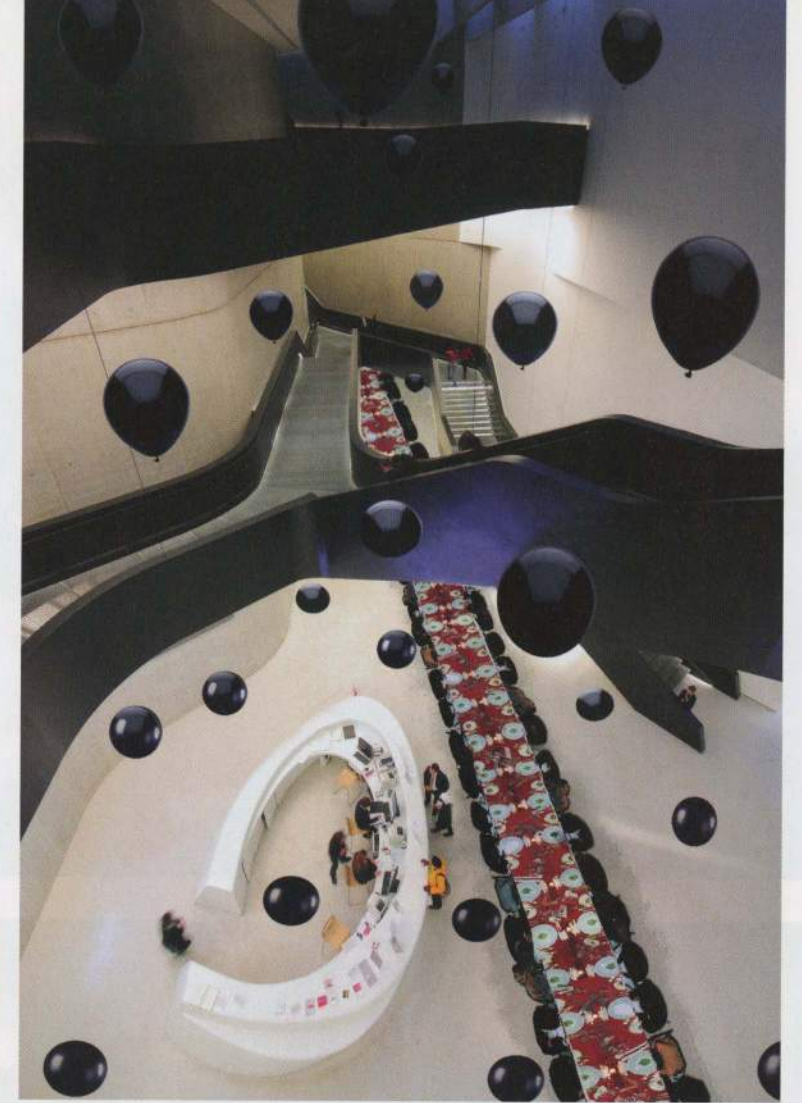
BY GINGER GREGG DUGGAN AND JUDITH HOOS FOX

Opposite: *OrtaWater—Storage Unit*, 2005–08. Steel structure, glass, copper tubes, projector, felt blankets, jerry can, water drum, first aid kits, glass carafe, plastic tube, taps, bucket, bottles, and flasks, 210 x 150 x 80 cm. Above: *70 x 7 The Meal act XXXII*, 2011. Table set for 300, with silk-screened table runner, Royal Limoges porcelain plates, helium-filled balloons, seeds, and messages, view of work at MAXXI, Rome.

COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Lucy + Jorge Orta's work is situated at the intersection of performance art and object-making, where symbol conflates with tool and relational aesthetics merges with physical forms. Their earliest concerns continue into the present, with additional issues layered over initial areas of investigation, resulting in a rich harmonic practice that addresses the conditions that define our existence—the availability of food and clean water, the sustainability of the biosphere, and the extension of basic human rights across the globe. Lucy recently wrote, "How can art practice pave a new role, faced with the growing problems in this world? How can it erase the contradictions between formal aesthetics and social function? How can works of art empower and nurture constructive dialogue? What contribution can we as artists make to human and environmental sustainability?"¹

One powerful attempt to answer these queries can be seen in the Ortas' ongoing project, *70 x 7 The Meal*, a central work that has been staged numerous times over the past 15 years in more than 30 villages, towns, and cities around the world. Each separate "act," as the iterations are called, provides a forum for the examination of a specific issue that relates to the health of our planet and its inhabitants.





Above: *Amazonia—Aepyornis, Gallinimus, Allosaururus, Pelaeomastodon* (detail), 2009–10. 4 Royal Limoges porcelain fossil casts, enamel drawings, wood, and lacquered glass, table plinth: 100 x 100 x 110 cm. Left: *Amazonia—Madre de Dios—Fluvial Intervention Unit*, 2010. Dug-out pirogue, mirror, lacquered glass, steel frame, reconditioned wood, life rings, and toy animals, 160 x 150 x 550 cm.



with possible interpretations—the number of guests involved, the number of subsequent meals that can be held, the effects of the conversations that occur at these gatherings. An early *70 x 7 The Meal, act IV*, was staged in Dieuze, France. Half a kilometer of tables snaked through the small rural town of 3,000 inhabitants, and half the population gathered to share food and exchange ideas about the future of their community.

On October 5, 2013, Philadelphia will be the site of Studio Orta's *70 x 7 The Meal act XXXIV*. In celebration of its 30th year, Mural Arts, the incredibly successful private/public partnership that has distinguished Philadelphia through its large-scale public art program, has invited Lucy + Jorge Orta to design and stage the 34th rendition of *The Meal* as the culmination of its "What We Sow" initiative. Jane Golden, the inspirational director of the pro-

gram. Schools, a theater, community gardens, homes, small factories, a university, even a museum of contemporary art were built as a result.

By calling their iteration of the community banquet *70 x 7 The Meal*, the Ortas reference the biblical concept of *ad infinitum*, which is, of course, a phrase loaded

In conceiving *70 x 7 The Meal*, the Ortas looked to Padre Rafael García Herreros (1909–92), who initiated a series of benefit banquets in Bogotá in an effort to rebuild one of the most impoverished parts of the city. The meals were called *El Minuto de Dios*, and their purpose was to raise funds for an ambitious urban development pro-

Life Line—Survival Kit, 2008–09. Steel frame, laminated Lambda photograph, fabrics, webbing, floats, flasks, and jerry can whistle, 150 x 80 x 15 cm.

gram, writes: "We see in what we do the potential to create innovative works that connect artists with communities in meaningful ways, many of which lie outside the traditional role of mural-making. We want to mine all kinds of visual opportunities to promote positive social change and on-the-ground neighborhood transformation."²

The match between the Ortas' meals and Mural Arts' ambitions is perfect. After two visits to Philadelphia spent scouting sites, the Ortas have a sense of possible locations. The city's wide boulevards, handsome bridges, and riverside parkways offer many options for this event, their largest to date. They intend to locate *The Meal* on the grounds of Independence National Historical Park. This open expanse spanning nine city blocks and anchored by Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell Pavilion (National Park Service properties) could host nearly 1,000 guests. (More information is available at <http://muralarts.org/whatwesow>.)

As a result of their research trips, the Ortas decided to focus on heirloom species in contrast to commercial hybrids, specifically the seeds of foods, vegetables, and flowers that have been passed down for at least 50 years. The questions about conservation, invasive species, and factory farming raised by this investigation will provide the theme for the meal and inspire the design of the plates, table runners, chefs' and servers' aprons, and other accoutrements—formal elements that serve as the armature for interactions among participants. The issues addressed in Philadelphia's *act XXXIV* tie directly into *Amazonia*, the Ortas' recent body of work developed after a 2009 journey down the length of the Amazon with scientists, botanists, and anthropologists. By bringing together urban gardening groups, farmers' associations, and Slow Food proponents, Mural Arts is adding many voices to an ongoing discussion.

Studio Orta's work with and around food is not alone in the world of contemporary art. In the early 1990s, Rirkrit Tiravanija



began to cook Thai dishes in galleries and museums. These activities were about de-objectifying art, shifting the attention to process and away from product. The meals that he later began to stage in closed spaces were about what happened between artist and guests. In 1998, Lee Mingwei launched *The Dining Project*. After-hours in the Whitney Museum, he prepared meals to suit the preferences of dinner partners selected by lottery. Food as a means of establishing intimacy was the subject of this project.

In 2005, Fritz Haeg began his series of *Edible Estates*, which transform suburban

lawns into productive organic vegetable gardens, sources of food rather than consumers of fertilizers and pesticides. J. Morgan Puett's wood-fired feasts featuring artists as celebrity chefs lure art cognoscenti to a remote stylized paradise in rural Pennsylvania. Each of these disparate projects, as well as others treating food production and consumption, holds at its center a distinct impetus.³

The Ortas have used food to raise issues about availability since the beginning of their career. The waste in European markets drew them to Les Halles in 1997 to



Above: *OrtaWater—Fluvial Intervention Unit*, 2005. Canoe, steel structure, water network, gloves, buckets, crates, water drums, water tanks, flasks, copper pipes and taps, audio MP3, speakers, and OrtaWater bottles, 260 x 150 x 120 cm. Below: *OrtaWater—M.I.U. Urban Intervention Unit*, 2005. Piaggio Ape 50, steel structure, OrtaWater life jackets, silk-screen print, buckets, and copper taps, Piaggio: 253 x 161 x 126 cm.



collect the food discarded at the end of the day and transform it into preserves. They built apparati for the collection and preparation of food. They created sculptures out of food crates filled with photographic images of the foodstuffs they once held, sign and signifier once again one and the same. Issues that are very timely and topical in 2013—local consumer waste, Slow Food, and the inequalities of global food distribution—were already the Ortas' subject matter.

Their concern with food then expanded into an investigation of water—its purification and distribution. References to water and food recur in the iconography of their Antarctica project (2006–12). Some of the *Drop Parachutes*, hanging constructions that infer the delivery of emergency supplies to devastated populations, are dedicated to water, with canteens, cups, buckets, floats, and other water-related paraphernalia hanging from umbrella-like parachute forms. Those festooned with pots and pans and cooking utensils talk about the necessity of food for global survival. We see these same objects and themes in the wall-mounted *Life Line* constructions in which water taps call out both need and source.

GINO GABRIELI, FONDAZIONE REVILACQUA LA MASA, VENEZIA, COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND GALLERIA CONTINUA SAN GIMIGNANO / BEIJING / LE MOULIN



TOP: BOB GOEDENWAGEN, BOIJMANS MUSEUM VAN BEUNINGEN / BOTTOM: BERTRAND HUET, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Milk, an essential daily source of nutrition and emblem of life, is also of great significance to the Ortas' work. They have been studying milk containers, noting that without the right kind of container, this necessity cannot reach its destination. Here, packaging is about survival rather than branding. In 2010 and 2011, in collaboration with Royal DSM, dairy farmers in India, and the Baliehof farm in Jabeeke, Belgium, Lucy and Jorge created a series of life-size milk containers, including 20 different configurations from around the world, all in

cast aluminum, with one suite gleaming white, the other metallic silver. These elegant and ghostly forms can be read as Platonic renderings of this essential liquid.

Milk brings us to one of the Ortas' largest projects. An hour outside of Paris, along the Grand Morin River, they are bringing an abandoned region back to life with the founding of Les Moulins, a nonprofit research center for interdisciplinary workshops and residencies to promote the creation and presentation of experimental in-situ artworks. Two historic paper mills have now

Above: *OrtaWater—Purification Station*, 2005. Rowboat, drinking water purification system, steel structure, water tanks, jerry cans, canteens, pipes, MP3 audio player, speakers, and OrtaWater bottles, installation view. Left: *OrtaWater—Antarctica Fluvial Intervention Unit*, 2005–08. Rowboat, steel structure, neon, light box, bivouacs, fabrics, projectors, tubing, warning light, copper pipes and taps, plasma bottles, and national flags, 250 x 250 x 120 cm.

been added to this complex, but it began in 2000 with a dairy, La Laiterie. As in their artwork, emblem and issue conjoin here, the dairy as a place of gestation and production of essential ingredients. The Ortas have created a place where art and ideas are spawned and nurtured. As with so much of their work, an idea—whether a meal or a milk carton—begins small and through collective or communal experience, can become a catalyst for change.

Notes

¹ Lucy Orta, *Operational Aesthetics: The Work of Lucy + Jorge Orta* (London: University of the Arts, Professional Platform 2011), p. 5.

² Quoted in "Journeys South," exhibition catalogue, City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, 2011, p. 7.

³ For example, the works featured in "Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art," an exhibition at Chicago's Smart Museum, February 16–June 10, 2012.

Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox, c² (curatorsquared), develop exhibitions of cross-media contemporary design and art.