

Burnside, Madeline. "Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison." *ARTnews* (April 1978).

**HELEN MEYER HARRISON AND
NEWTON HARRISON**

(Ronald Feldman): During the 1960s a broad range of people whose area of primary interest was artistic rather than scientific gave ecological problems their attention. Entered in this way through poetry and myth and through seminal small magazines such as *lo* and *Alcheringa*, ecology in art remained tied to ethnopoetics and anthropology. This is the background from which the Harrisons' work has emerged. Their *Meditation on the*

Gabrielino. . . provides the clearest indication of these roots; it includes pictures of the Los Angeles landscape before it became subsumed into an urban environment and letters written by Hugo Reid to the *Los Angeles Star* in 1852. Reid was married to one of the last surviving Gabrielino Indians, and was thus in a good position to both possess and publicize the events which led to the extinction of these people. The Harrisons have annotated enlargements of Reid's text. While Reid describes the open acts of cruelty, slavery and massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards and Catholic missionaries, the Harrisons' marginalia analyzes Reid's prose in order to emphasize the political (rather than personal) consequences of these actions. Luscious sepia-toned photographs of vegetation and Reid's rich text combine to make this one of the Harrisons' most sensual, if horrifying works, but the effect it achieves is not as successful as the starker *Meditation on the Condition of the Sacramento River*. This meditation, using the maps that have come to be the Harrisons' most characteristic material, contrasts the status quo of the irrigation system through which the river is exploited with the Harrisons' suggestions for a return to the river's natural ecology. The irrigation project has been subject to criticism since its inception, but the water problem that hit California during the development of this piece (1976-78) makes the issues involved suddenly topical.

Presented with explanatory notes, what differentiates the best of the Harrisons' work from the majority of ecological discussion in art is their research into practical problems, and their activist successes which stand behind the apparently cool posture of the meditations. This is a rare example of the kind of political artwork that refuses to be separated from the arena from which it emerged, and yet is capable of standing up in an art world context of performance and documentation.