

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison with a panel from "The Lagoon Cycle." Photo: Peggy Jarrell Kaplan.  
All photos courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NY.

# HELEN MAYER HARRISON AND NEWTON HARRISON

## *METAPHOR AND HABITAT*

Rebecca Solnit

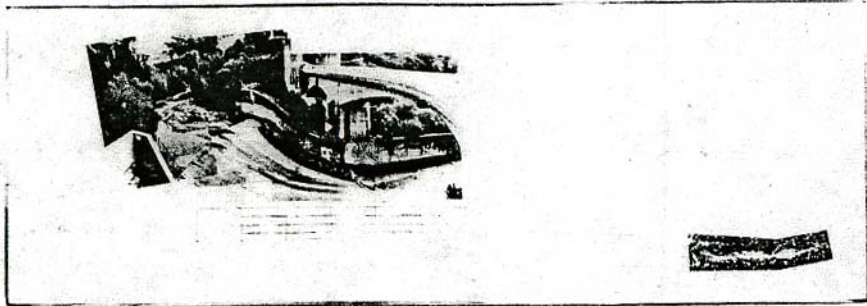
In the eucalyptus-shaded parking lot outside the studio that Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison share at the University of California, San Diego, Newton waves a hand in the direction of the science building. One of the benefits, he says, of teaching at a university rather than an art school is the opportunity for dialogue with professors of other fields. He recently ran into, for example, a virology professor just back from a national conference who told him about the rampant mutation of viruses brought about by toxics in the environment, about possible plagues that make AIDS look insignificant. After painting a scarifying picture of the viral future, Newton smiles buoyantly and says that he and Helen function something like viruses themselves.

Newton Harrison, who has taught at

UCSD since 1967, was trained as a sculptor and began working with natural systems in the sixties. Helen Mayer Harrison, who has shared the teaching position for the last several years, has a Ph.D. in the philosophy of education, and her epistemological incisiveness is as much a part of their work as is ecology. Married when they were very young in 1953, the Harrisons have worked as a collaborative team since 1970, and because their work grows out of their ongoing conversation, it is difficult to departmentalize each's contributions.

The Harrisons' work over the last two decades or so has been about the environment, and in this subject they find the richness of metaphor and possibility that more traditional artists find in cultural history or autobiography. Their methodology is viral,

to some extent: what they do, most essentially, is visit places and discuss the nature and possibility of those places with the local community. Like viruses, they become alien presences that may alter the functioning of the organism. Their work encompasses performance, written texts that formalize their dialogues, photography, drawing, mapmaking, installations, and actual modification of the landscapes that are the subject of all of their art. Some portions of the work — e.g. the collaged photographs with inscriptions in Helen's neat cursive — function largely within the art world, though they may draw in outsiders. Other aspects function directly in the environment and in the larger community, though they continue to have the imaginative challenge of art. The Harrisons could be called conceptual landscape artists,

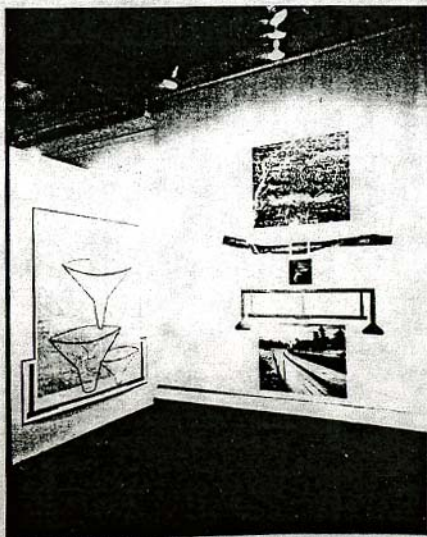


The Harrisons, "Pasadena Part I," *Amoyo Seco Release: A Serpentine for Pasadena.*

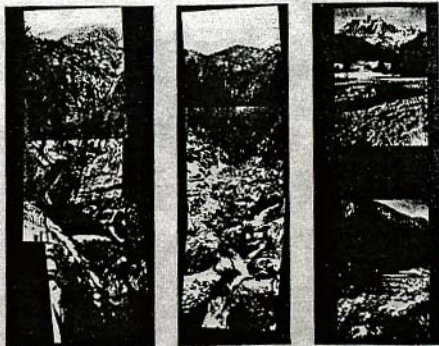


Street graffiti photographed by the Harrisons, 1977.

The Harrisons, "Pasadena Part I," *Amoyo Seco Release: A Serpentine for Pasadena.* Installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NY.



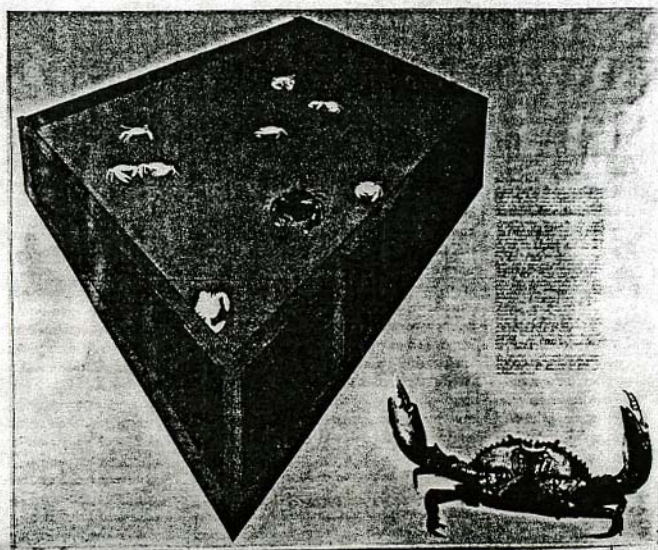
The Harrisons, *Sava River*, "The Sava has Two Beginnings."





The Harrisons, "The Lagoon Cycle," 1st Lagoon, Panel II.

The Harrisons, "The Lagoon Cycle," 2nd Lagoon, Panel III.



worked on from the early seventies until 1983, suggests something of the nature of their process. The permanent work of art is itself a pictorial and poetic installation and book documenting their experiments and musings over those years, which began when they were introduced to a Sri Lankan crab.

*he knew a hardy creature a crab  
and supposed it could live under  
museum conditions*

In this work the microcosm of the crab leads them to the macrocosm of Sri Lanka's culture and agriculture; their experiments with raising the crab under artificial conditions leads them to develop more and more complex simulations of the crabs' habitat; the commercial possibilities of crab raising leads them to talk to scientists and businessmen. Each contact stimulates another reflective conversation between the Lagoonkeeper (Newton) and the Witness (Helen).

Lagoonkeeper: . . . he has frozen his  
boundaries

*leaving no room for flow or chance  
or even a modest ambiguity*

Witness: Now a lagoon is a container with  
flexible

*boundaries  
wherein all the parts are  
continually restating  
themselves*

*and continually reestablishing  
relationships*

As the narrative progresses, they reject the scientists and businessmen and the Lagoonkeeper moves on to broader and broader issues and wider and wider fields of possibility — to the history of water in the southwestern U.S. and the possibility of further changing that history, of making the Salton Sea a huge lagoon for crab raising, of connecting that sea to the Pacific. His plans rise to a kind of crescendo of hubris, then collapse.

*Pay attention to the state of belief*

*Pay attention to the belief stated*

*Pay attention to the flow of belief and the willing  
of desire*

*Pay attention to the flow of belief  
and the enacting of desire*

*Pay attention to the system upon which desire is  
enacted*

*and the system that generates desire*

*Attend to the discourse between belief  
systems and environmental systems*

Helen, the Witness, serves as the voice of restraint and wisdom. The last, elegaic lagoon expands the scope of their attention to the whole globe as an ecosystem, to the contrast between the water buffalo and the tractor and the pitfalls of progress, to the possibility of global warming (several years, incidentally, before it became a public concern). The narrative documents a progression that

echoes the history of the culture, of increasing manipulation of the natural world with increasing damage to it, and then it abandons manipulation in favor of contemplation. *The Lagoon Cycle* ends with nothing having been changed at all, except the minds of its two narrators. Deciding against doing anything to the landscape is a profound gesture within the legacy of earth art, not to mention the legacy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Manifest Destiny. Though the Harrisons often operate on a scale that dwarfs Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, they do so less as a means of making marks than of healing them. At Artpark in New York, for example, they decided to restore a forty-acre spoils pile by means of compost as their work (and became the first artists there to have a project halted on account of scale).

One project that is a notable exception to this restorative approach is *Topographie of Terrors*, a memorial project under consideration for the former S.S. and Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, the nerve center for the death camps and labor camps of the Third Reich. No conventional monument to so vast a bureaucracy of evil seemed appropriate or adequate, and they conceived of a three-part work that would memorialize without monumentalizing. Retrieved memory is the metaphor running through this counter to a policy of obliteration. On the open ground of the site they propose a herbaceous equivalent of scar tissue, *trummerflora*, or rubble flora. Bombed rubble, they found out in the course of investigating the site, nurtures a unique set of plants, and they propose to outline the building sites in rubble from the site and let its *trummerflora* grow. In a small building nearby would be a bank of video screens on which the names of the victims are spoken, so that over a period all the names of all known victims will have been said. Finally, they propose that the still-standing building that housed the department that organized the work camps should house a supercomputer for information related to the Holocaust, the S.S. and other facets of this history.

Though the *Topographie of Terrors* is an atypical piece for the Harrisons, it might be hard to pick a typical one. Certain hallmarks have become evident over the years, and certain themes run through all the work. Their first collaborative forays — such as a portable fish farm, an orchard that could be put in a museum — were called *The Survival Series*, and all of their work has considered issues of survival. Much of their work has dealt with water systems, from pieces in 1977 that addressed the administrative fragmentation that led to the fragmentation of responsibility for the water systems of the Great Lakes and those of California, to their most ambitious piece to date, which deals with the restora-

tion/preservation of wetlands along a thousand miles of Yugoslavia's Sava River. Connecting the conceptual to the actual is the essence of their activity, and perhaps distinguishes them as much from artists as from engineers — the actual not only as the feasible, but as the informed, as an art grounded in the natural sciences.

In the early eighties Newton said, "We see modernism as the successive division, into smaller and smaller categories, of all human knowledge, the operant belief being that the establishment of microcategorization permits a clear perception of individual phenomenon and therefore deeper understanding. The metaphors are peculiar." To which Helen H. added, "We feel that to know more and more about something out of the context in which that something occurs leads to less and less understanding of the something, since everything exists in context. I consider this one of the great problems of our culture . . ." One of their primary metaphors is conversation; they view conversation as improvisation, and have proposed the universe itself as a vast conversation. Within that framework their own ongoing conversation enriches the meaning of their work. It embodies the kind of responsiveness and divergence they propose for engaging with any consideration, and suggests that listening as well as speaking is necessary for the artist.

Formalized in print, there is a characteristic tone to their conversations, a kind of chanting refrain of ideas that translates science and administration into recitative poetry. The whole of their work seems to overwhelm the parts, so that they are seldom considered as, for example, landscape photographers or performance artists, though they are both. Some of their most poetic pieces have been done on their own initiative, without a commission or specific community audience. Among them are not only *The Lagoon Cycle*, but such works as *Meditations on the Gabrielino, Whose Name for Themselves Is No Longer Remembered Although We Know that They Farmed with Fire and Fought Wars by Singing* (which is about the Native American inhabitants of the Los Angeles area who were wiped out by the Spanish). Most of their work over the last decade, however, has been the fruit of invitations to visit to visit communities and respond to their specific landscapes/circumstances, with the invitation ensuring that some kind of larger dialogue is ready to take place, that the context gives the work its largest possibilities. □

*The Harrisons are represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.*

**Rebecca Solnit** is the author of *Secret Exhibition: Six California Artists of the Cold War Era* (City Lights, 1990) and teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute.