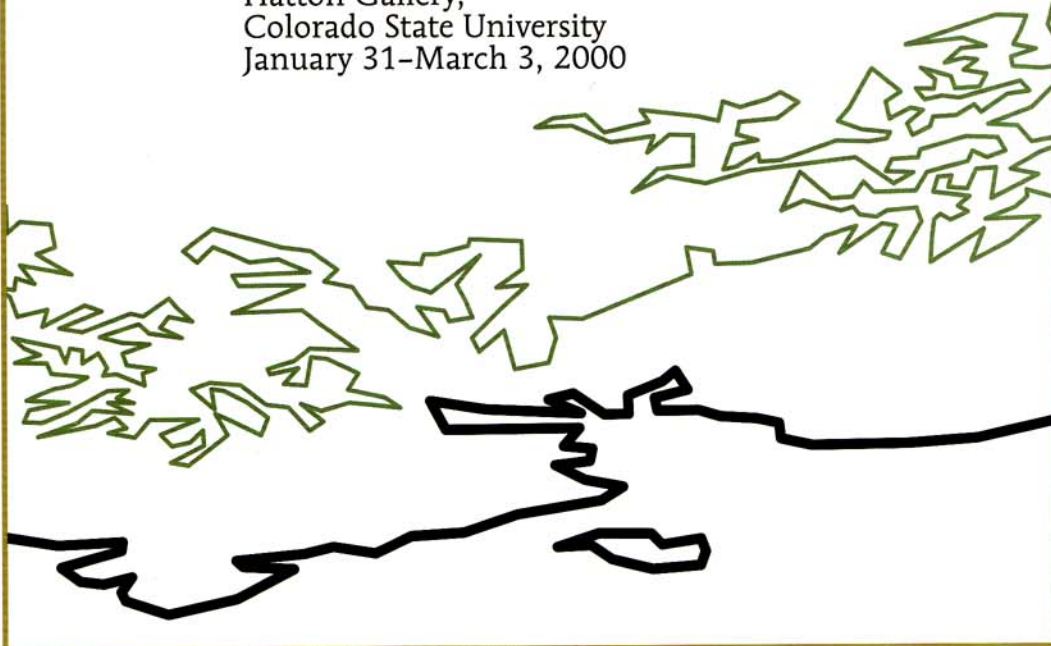


Helen & Newton Harrison

The Serpentine Lattice

Hatton Gallery,
Colorado State University
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Helen and Newton Harrison's Serpentine Lattice

by
Eleanor Heartney

As evidence mounts that disruptions in weather patterns and global temperatures and reductions in species variety are linked to human activity, it seems increasingly clear that modernity is on a collision course with nature. The hallowed principles of efficiency, market growth and technological progress which have made mankind master of the globe run counter to an ecosystem which thrives on diversity and organic change. With each new environmental or natural disaster, experts express dismay and consternation. Yet their pleas seem to fall on deaf ears, and it often seems that nothing can be done to stem the McDonaldization of the natural world.

Not so, argue Helen and Newton Harrison, a husband and wife artist team who have spent the last twenty five years producing proposals that deal with specific environmental problems around the globe. They consistently challenge conventional thinking about flood control, irrigation and land use. They suggest ways that a reversal of present policies can rejuvenate damaged land and waterways while bringing humans back in sync with nature. The key, for the Harrisons, is to restore biodiversity to places which have been reduced by urban development and monocultural agriculture to specters of their former selves.

The work on display here is a case in point. *The Serpentine Lattice*, which was originally created in 1992 for the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery in Portland Oregon, proposes to create a new future for the temperate rainforest of the Pacific North West. The land area which is subject of this investigation stretches from California up through Canada to Alaska. The Harrisons discovered that clearcutting has reduced the old growth in these forests by as much as 90%. In discussions with local ecologists and foresters they learned that the loss of the old ecosystem was having disastrous effects, among them severe reductions in the number of resident species and alterations in the ozone and oxygen levels in the local atmosphere.

The Harrisons were aware that local loggers, politicians and city leaders were heavily invested in maintaining an economy based on logging. How could they make an argument for the preservation of the small amount of pristine forest that still exists, and the restoration of large sections which have been reduced to wasteland? Over the years, the Harrisons have evolved a unique way of presenting their case. They call it the "Conversation," and it is a mode whereby they construct a solution to the problem at hand through discussion with each other and interested parties.

As presented here in a series of texts written in the form of dialogues, the Conversation flows like a meandering river as questions are posed, ideas are tossed out, metaphors for rethinking the situation established and a workable solution arrived at. It is a gentle eco-poetry, which takes into account opposing interests and

conventional ways of regarding the situation, while subtly restating the situation in ways that suddenly open up new possibilities which were hitherto unthinkable.

In this, as in all their work, the Harrisons explore their ideas through a series of metaphors. Here the operative metaphors are the lattice and the serpentine form which, laid over each other, give rise to the picture of a network of watersheds. These, the Harrisons envision, can be linked together throughout the rainforest, restoring the biodiversity of plant and animal life which have been suppressed and destroyed. From this they extrapolate a further metaphor, this time taken from the aesthetic realm. They propose to reverse figure and ground, so that human activity, formerly dominating any land use decision, becomes instead a single "figure" within the larger ecological field.

These elements are presented within this work in several different ways. The textual conversation details the thinking that underlies the proposal. A thirty six foot map presents the rainforest as the green swath which it could be if the proposal is undertaken. And a series of slide projections of logged and decimated forest from places on the map as they exist today reveals the urgent need to act before the forest is completely decimated.



Helen & Newton Harrison
Washington, Olympia National
Forest, 1992.
The Serpentine Lattice.
Courtesy Ronald Feldman
Fine Arts, New York
Photo Credit: Trygve Steen.





Helen & Newton Harrison
Washington State, 1990.
The Serpentine Lattice.
Courtesy Ronald Feldman
Fine Arts, New York
Photo Credit: Trygve Steen.

There is a utopian quality to the Harrisons' thinking. In this, as in other works, they envision a world without borders, in which national and state lines do not overpower the requirements of ecological systems. And they argue for a political system in which ecological necessity is not subjugated to human activity.

However, from another perspective their ideas are, as they point out, eminently practical. This is because they insist on a longer view of costs and benefits than short term planners are accustomed to taking. The economic arguments against reclamation and restoration need to be reframed in such a way that it becomes clear that jobs and homes are not irreconcilable with environmentalism. The Harrisons

adopt the lingua franca of economics to reveal the logic of their position, posing the ideas of eco-debt, gross national ecosystem, and an eco security system which functions like the social security system. Suddenly it becomes clear that the problem is simply one of priorities.

This kind of approach has characterized the Harrisons' work throughout their career. *The Lagoon Cycle*, an early work which continued to develop from the years 1973 to 1985, is an environmental narrative which begins with the search for an organism which can live under museum conditions and opens out into a discussion of the greenhouse effect and a consideration of the ecosystem of the entire Pacific Ocean. Along the way they examine the eco-sociology of Sri Lanka, interview farmers, businessmen and ecologists, and study the crab culture of California.

The trajectory of this work, from the statement of a simple problem to a recognition of the interrelations of science, politics, sociology and ecology, might be a restatement of the Harrisons' own evolution. They have become increasingly insistent on finding solutions which embrace both the micro and the macro scale.

For instance, in 1976 they created *Sacramento Meditations*, a critique of the irrigation policies of the Sacramento-San Joaquin watershed in Northern California. Using means ranging from billboards and radio and television performances to murals and posters, they demonstrated that the present irrigation system of dams, canals, pumping stations and power stations have resulted in such unexpected side effects as deadly wetlands, salt contaminated land and severe droughts.

To counter this backwards thinking they proposed a shift from the paradigm "Exploit and Consume" to that of "Appropriation and Beneficial Use."

The Harrisons quickly moved from critique to proposals for action. One of their most ambitious works, *Breathing Space for the Sava River* from 1989, represented an effort to deal with the entire length of the Sava River which runs through the former Yugoslavia. The Harrisons began from the fact that the river and floodplain had been severely damaged by the practice of industrial farming. They proposed the creation of a nature corridor which would insulate the river from unnecessary contamination, thereby using the processes of nature to heal the effects of industry. Employing the metaphor of sanctuary, they proposed a series of ponds which would provide a reedbed purification system while serving as havens for wildlife. They proposed the introduction of organic farms, and the use of warm water from an existing atomic energy plant to supply fish hatcheries.



This proposal was under serious consideration by the World Bank and the Croation Zoological Society when, tragically, war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, making any environmental work impossible.

One of their most recent projects, entitled *Green Heart Vision* elaborates on the reconciliation of urban development and healthy ecology. Created for the Cultural Council of South Holland, it is a proposal to save the "green heart of Holland," an immense agricultural area in the center of Holland which is threatened by the expected influx of over a million and a half new residents in the next few decades. Rather than allowing market forces to dictate the location of new population centers, a move which would undoubtedly lead to intense population concentrations and the creation of sprawling, ecologically disastrous mega cities, they proposed the creation of a Bio-Diversity Ring. This green ring would insulate the Green Heart, act as an air and water purifying system and separate urban developments from each other. By distributing population more evenly throughout the country, the proposal would serve two related purposes dear to the Harrisons' hearts: It would restore biodiversity and cultural diversity, providing for a more liveable environment for years to come.

Though the Harrisons make their home in the art world and frame their work as art, they clearly are not interested in being confined to the white walls of a gallery. Their work reaches out to the planners, ecologists, scientists and members of the environmentally concerned public, all of whom are urged to join in the Conversation. And, on numerous occasions, it has turned out that their ideas have been seriously discussed and partially adopted by those in decision making positions.

Yet despite the links between their works and other more technical disciplines, the Harrisons insist on the art status of their work. They feel that as outsiders to the technical discourses they are free to alter the conventional terms and challenge conventional assumptions. Their reliance on metaphor demonstrates their distance from the more linear and instrumental approach favored by scientists and planners. And their insistence on narrative and on framing their ideas in a conversational mode allows them to reach a wider audience. They counter the tendency of the technocrats to lock non-experts out of their discussions with a deliberate resort to accessible language. Thus they widen the Conversation, and thereby contribute to the dissemination of power.

These larger political concerns run as undercurrents through *The Serpentine Lattice*. One recurring refrain from this work is the phrase: "A tree farm is not a forest." It is a simple idea, clearly stated and easy to understand, but its implications are breathtaking. And that is what the Conversation is all about.



Helen & Newton Harrison
*Meditations on the Conditions
of the Sacramento River.*
The Delta and Bay at San
Francisco, 1976-78.
Courtesy Ronald Feldman
Fine Arts, New York





Helen & Newton Harrison
Casting a Green Net: Can It Be We Are Seeing a Dragon?,
1998. BlueCoat Gallery, Liverpool, England.
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

cover image:

Helen & Newton Harrison
The Serpentine Lattice, 1992.
Courtesy The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery
Reed College, Portland, Oregon.
Photo Credit: David Krapes.



About the Program: The *Critic and Artist Residency Series* was founded in 1997 to bring prominent artists and critics to the Colorado State University campus. The series was created from an anonymous endowment (entitled the FUNd at CSU) given to the Department of Art. The program puts students, faculty and the community in touch with important figures in the contemporary art world through public lectures, open forums, classroom interactions and critiques. The artist residency also includes a major exhibition of the artist's work in the department's Hatton Gallery. Since the fall of 1997 critics Peter Plagens of *Newsweek*, Terry Barrett of Ohio State University, Christopher Knight of the *Los Angeles Times* and Eleanor Heartney, essayist for this brochure, and artists Byron Kim and Tim Rollins + K.O.S. have been in residence.

About the Artists: Artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison are Professors Emeritus from the Department of Visual Arts, UC San Diego, with a background in psychology, literature, philosophy and anthropology (Helen) and figurative sculpture and field painting (Newton). The Harrisons began their collaboration in 1971. The *Survival Series*, which included the first discrete ecosystem as subject matter in art, launched an innovative and esteemed career for the pair. Their oeuvre includes an extensive list of international projects and exhibitions such as *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland*, commissioned by the Cultural Council of Southern Holland and Province of South Holland and *California Wash*, commissioned by the city of Santa Monica. Their work has been the subject of several book chapters and innumerable articles, reviews and catalogues.

About the Author: Eleanor Heartney is an independent cultural critic and author. She has written numerous articles and reviews in many contemporary journals, magazines and newspapers such as *Art News*, *Contemporaria* and the *Washington Post*, has been Critic in Residence at *Sculpture* magazine and is presently Contributing Editor at *Art in America*, *New Art Examiner* and *Artpress*. In addition to catalogue essays and book chapters, Heartney has also served as curator, panel moderator, lecturer and has held adjunct professorships and visiting critic residencies at several U.S. art schools. She has been honored with the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism. She is the author of one book *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*.

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