

# A Marriage Made on Earth:

## Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison

JANE INGRAM ALLEN



One of the most distinguished and long-lasting examples of married couples collaborating in public art is the team of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. They have been working as equal partners on public art projects with an ecological focus since the late 1960s. They have been married for 53 years, and their creative collaboration is based on the kind of solid, everyday relationship that comes with being together for so long.

When they met, Helen was an educator with a background in psychology and literature and Newton was a sculptor. He had become acquainted with the work of conceptual artists and decided that he wanted to create art that could make a difference in the world—that could contribute something positive toward the preservation of the natural environment.

It was an idealistic time; Helen's consciousness of the issue had been raised by reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and other pioneering books on the planetary crisis. Newton decided that he needed Helen's point of view and her knowledge. The pair decided to pool their talents and to limit their art practice to environmental issues and solutions.

Here, (from post-interview e-mails—and in the third person) is how the Harrisons themselves tell the story of their early work:

Helen and Newton's collaboration began very informally in 1969, when Newton was commissioned by the Crafts Museum to do a work in a show called *Fur and Feathers*. He chose to do protest work by making a big map pointing to every endangered and extinct species on record. Helen, at that time, was director of educational programs at University of California extension service and Newton was an assistant professor. Helen did the research, directing a team of students; Newton did the imagery and the conceptual work.

In 1971, Newton began a series of works called *The Survival Pieces*. Fundamentally, they were mini-farms, portable fish farms, orchards, portable pastures, and the like. That same year, Helen put aside her job and began to work full-time on the art. From 1971 through 1973, the roads they took were intentionally stereotypical (male and female doing expected tasks). Helen was doing research and producing feasts within the installation of the "survival" pieces. Also, she was sometimes doing the planting.



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *California Wash Garden: A Memorial to the Endangered Wash Ecosystems of Coastal California* (overview), 1996, Santa Monica, Calif.



A successful collaboration provides a context for professionals to do work that transcends and dissolves the boundaries between their disciplines in a way that produces a product that could not have been conceived of individually...an alloy, a melting together of different materials to develop something that has a greater strength than any of the ingredients alone.  
– George Suyama, architect

In 1974, they started *The Lagoon Cycle*. In this work, Helen introduced photography and the idea of extended narrative and storytelling, as her background was in the philosophy of education and English literature—psychology and anthropology as well.

Beginning about 1975, they introduced in their work something they called “the Morning Conversations.” From that point on the collaboration took a very flexible form that had simple rules to it. They were:

1. If one of them did not want to do a work, they didn't do it.
2. They took the time and energy to teach each other, in some senses, how to be one another.
3. An outcome of this was that, in any given work, one or the other would take on the text, depending on who was most interested, and the other would take on the imagery of the installation, depending on who was most interested. Newton mainly worked on installation while Helen often worked with presentation.
4. A decision was made when the collaboration began to accept no commissions and to do no work that did not clearly benefit the global life system, and all agreements with others had the understanding that the Harrisons considered the environment as their client.
5. They chose also not to do repetitive work. Each commission that they accepted, or work that they involved themselves in, was new to them and therefore became, in a sense, a teacher. For instance, their first global warming work was done in 1973 to 1974. Since then, they have taken up the issue again and again, always from a different perspective.
6. The work of the Harrisons has a great deal of writing in it. Their method is straightforward. Newton writes the initial text; Helen edits it, comments, and develops it, Newton comments, and Helen finishes it. Thus, they have evolved a very comfortable way of working where Newton has the first word and Helen has the last word.

In the Harrisons's collaboration there is a definite joining of the feminine and masculine points of view. In an article for *High Performance* magazine (archived in the Reading Room section at [www.communityarts.net](http://www.communityarts.net)), art historian Arlene Raven examines this aspect of their collaborative process in connection with *The Lagoon Cycle* project. “An intriguing aspect of the two personas of *The Lagoon Cycle*,” she writes, “is their clarifying fidelity to aspects of male and female, nature and

culture. They weave their colloquy to reconnect these personas and thus initiate a healing that stands against the antagonism of mechanistic culture for unruly nature. As metaphor and example, their collaboration also reconsiders the plunder of world ecology and the fissure between men and women. Their eco-feminism and eco-aesthetics spring from this point of departure.”

Helen seems most often to play the role of questioner, furnishing the words and the philosophical background; Newton is the active producer, the technician and builder. They often speak of their collaboration in terms of a dialogue. In *The Lagoon Cycle* dialogue, it has been speculated that Helen is the “Witness” and Newton the “Lagoonmaker.” No one knows for sure, and it doesn't matter. In this work and others they respond to each other, and the results are more than just a combination of both points of view. They're a product of a sort of third mind that comes about through the process of collaboration. In another e-mail, the Harrisons write:

From sometime in the late 1970s and continuing to this very day, with rare exceptions, all of their work has in fact emerged “in the space between them.” They call the space between them the real artist. The production of the work is virtually impossible if either of them is subtracted. They have created, from their perspective, an invisible but ever-present third artist who is really doing this work and who may really even be providing the information in these comments on their collaboration.

The Harrisons don't hesitate to involve people outside their marriage as co-collaborators. In fact, they credit their works to the Harrison Studio or Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison and Associates, an ever-evolving group that takes on different people in different situations and for different projects. The studio has included their son and other family members, as well as a variety of people with expertise needed for a particular project. “The Harrison Studio is designed to form and re-form itself for each work,” says their web site, “since the people with whom we work become the Harrison Studio for that place. Thus, there is the Harrison Studio Santa Fe, or Harrison Studio Borna in the former East Germany, or Harrison Studio Bauhaus, etc. As always, the overarching concept is envisioned by ourselves



ABOVE: *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Land, Gaining Wisdom*, 2007. Great Britain triptych shows order of ocean rising 5, 10, and 15 meters. First sketch for a 20 x 30-foot model.

RIGHT: Helen and Newton presenting *Peninsula Europe: The Rising Waters of the Warming Lands* to students in Oslo, Norway, 2007.

in response to a period of study in the environment. Often, it grows out of interaction with the group with whom we are in a teaching and learning relationship about place, a mutually fructifying set of transactions.”

Sometimes, these collaborators are outside the art world, as in *Cruciform Tunnel*, a work in San Diego, which is a good example of the Harrisons’ fusion of teaching, learning, and art-making. “Standard ecological researchers made a series of experiments with the canyons of San Diego,” explains Newton. “We then did a work based on this research, and proposed *Cruciform Tunnel*. A lot of our work depends on illuminating ecological research by others, which sits in limbo, in an untransformed state.”

The Harrisons’ also collaborate with other artists. In a work begun in 2005 titled *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Land, Gaining Wisdom*, the Harrisons are working with the English artist David Haley, and have established Harrison Studio Associates/Britain, which includes a variety of collaborating experts. Exhibitions of this project are pending, with an opening at London City Hall set for 2008. (More information about this project can be found at <http://greenhousebritain.greenmuseum.org>.)

Collaboration goes even further; the Harrisons build community partnerships that will continue healing a bioregion even after they no longer participate. They claim no ownership



of the ideas they generate and are glad to see others continue the work they have begun. Disciplinary boundaries mean little to them; in fact, they were among the first artists to collaborate across disciplines in ecological art. They summed up their attitude in another e-mail:

Ultimately, the specialty they have is to not have one. Basically, they see their process not as inter-disciplinary but as post-disciplinary. They reason that any new work may require an investigation of a new discipline or a deepening of an understanding they have of an existing discipline. Therefore, disciplines themselves are simply seen as aids in addressing the subject matters they work with.

This open-mindedness and willingness to collaborate with whomever can get the job done—rooted in their nuanced and well-developed collaboration with one another—make the Harrisons an inspiring, and reliable, example for other artists to follow.

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Collaboration is more than just fitting two personalities together. It's a matter of personal timing. There are times when you want to reach out and collaborate in order to grow as an artist and a person.

— M. Paul Friedberg, landscape architect