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Mapping a Better World

By Peter Selz, *Special to the Planet*
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"Greenhouse Britain" by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison at the Kala Gallery.

The dismal failure of the Copenhagen world conference on climate change makes the current show at the Kala Art Institute acutely relevant. Taking the perilous increase in global warming as a serious reality, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison have created major works of art for more than 30 years; their art instructs the viewer about environmental degradation as well as offering potential correctives.

The Harrisons were first seen in the Bay Area in 1979 with *Meditations on the Condition of the Sacramento River, the Delta and the Bays of San Francisco* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Floating Museum and in the streets of the city. Then as now, they displayed huge

maps not only to shape our perceptions of the problems, but also as tools for change.

One of the pieces in the current show includes a large geological map that shows the rising waters in the Bay Area with the probable result of water engulfing Stockton and much the Central Valley. The piece also proposes a new form of government, one which would consider the ecosystems of the whole valley floor as an entity and provide necessary ecosolutions.

The Harrisons take issue with the slogan "think globally, act locally," believing the present danger to life on this planet demands global action. Their art is conceptual both in its focus on systems and in its use of language as metaphor. And it is political in its impact.

The exhibition, previously seen in New York, is entitled *Greenhouse Britain and Force Majeur*. The situation in Britain is presented with a number of works. In the center of the gallery there is a relief map of Britain, measuring 7 by 13 feet with overhead projections showing the rising waters, storm surges and a redrawn coastline. A 10-minute soundtrack of three voices is an important part of the display. There is also a narrative drawing of the island, showing six consecutive images of the rising waters and diminishing land. But solutions are suggested: A three-minute video proposes a defense and salvation of the city of Bristol before it is inundated by the Avon River. The Harrisons, working with the Land Planning Group of Sheffield University, propose 9,000-person villages in order to accommodate the population and avoid further urban sprawl, which, like the previous visionary architecture by Paolo Solari, suggest sky-rise buildings that encompass vertical high streets and hanging gardens. These vertical villages would be surrounded by meadows and grasslands. Poetic texts accompany these visual depictions.

The exhibition includes maps of Peninsula Europe, a major project that has occupied the Harrisons in the last

few years. The project would eliminate national borders and look at Europe from the Pyrenees to the Carpathians as one unified system in which the mountain ranges and watersheds would determine policies.

The work of the Harrisons can also be seen within the modality of performance art. A dialogue, infused with poetic metaphor, is an essential aspect of their work. A conversation between the two artists will take place at Kala at 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 30. Additional relevant voices will be heard in a symposium at 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 20.