

# Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

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For figures from John Muir to Ansel Adams and beyond, the Sierra Nevada has long been a locus classicus of the American wilderness sublime. Traditionally represented as a sacred zone of untouched nature standing outside of human history, the transcendentalist landscape imaginary of the Sierra in fact developed in tandem with a range of biopolitical technologies concerning the government of populations, territories, and resources. Ranging from the imperial survey photography of Timothy O'Sullivan to Adams's own work for the Department of the Interior, this ambivalent history shadows "Sierra Nevada: An Adaptation," the recent exhibition by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Since the early 1970s, the work of the Harrisons has involved a similar antinomy between a quasi-Romantic poetics of the earth, on one hand, and the notion of the artist as ecosystems manager advanced by their early interlocutor Jack Burnham in *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (1968), on the other. Though their practice has always approached landscapes in terms of expanded systems rather than bounded sites, in their recent work they take on a radically new sense of time and scale, dealing with the planetwide crisis of "anthropogenic," or "man-made," climate change. Suggesting both an evolutionary adjustment and an artistic translation, their current project imagines an "adaptation" of the Sierra to the climate-related crises that are likely to affect it in the coming decades (glacial melting, topsoil erosion, drought, fire, and downriver flooding). The project was announced as a "50-year collaboration" with the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art, a conceptually significant expansion of the time horizon for an artwork, attuning its audience to the long-term, intergenerational ramifications of global warming.

The centerpiece of the exhibition was an enormous satellite photograph of the Sierra laid out across the length of the gallery floor in such a way that the viewer was bound to physically tread across it in looking at other works in the show. Issuing an invitation to WALK THE SIERRA (shades of Muir's famous trek), the installation involved a perspectival, scalar, and locational disorientation, substituting the monolithic sublimity of Adams's canonical photograph *Half-Dome* with a digitized expanse of topographic patterns and traces that confounded any distinction between natural and man-made landscape. Indeed, the Sierra constitutes a kind of transitional geography, marked not only by two centuries of logging, grazing, and tourism, but also by the unintentional carbon footprint of global capitalist development in which we as viewers and consumers are implicated.

The rest of the exhibition was devoted to imagining a large-scale "adaptive response" to ramifications of climate crisis in the Sierra. This involved two silent animations imagining a massive pilot project for recovering topsoil at a designated "adaptation site," which would be part of a proposed "Sierra Nevada drain basin authority to look after the well-being of the whole." The animations were flat-footed aesthetically, but the experience of watching them was marked by the unrelenting clacking of a metronome installed on a separate wall; the latter created a surprisingly unnerving ambience at once sonic and temporal, calling to mind an alarm clock or a time bomb.

Despite the urgent tone and expansive vision of the project, certain critical questions need to be posed. For instance, we learn little from the exhibition about the actual policies and actors currently involved in the region for which the artists' speculative-visionary proposal is designed. Further, while concerned with *adapting* to climate change, the show does not address how this capitalist-driven eco-emergency and its uneven human fallout might be *combated* in political terms. Echoing Buckminster Fuller and Joseph Beuys, the Harrisons appeal to the ecological fate of a generic humanity, thus neutralizing questions of environmental inequality, conflict, and justice. While they call for



View of "Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison," 2011.

the collaborative participation of a range of "stakeholders," they describe their proposal as a "symphony of effort" that "creates a consensus to proceed"—what Miwon Kwon has called an "operative community" rather than a dissensual public sphere. This is a critical difference between the Harrisons and their younger colleagues who are involved with the politico-ecological turn at work in contemporary art such as Allora/Calzadilla, Amy Balkin, Matthew Friday, and the Yes Men. That said, the Harrisons' "Sierra Nevada" nevertheless stands as a remarkable remediation of an art-historical locus classicus that is quite literally losing ground as we speak.

—Yates McKee