



Helen and Newton Harrison: View of the Sava River project from the installation "Changing the Conversation," 1991; at Ronald Feldman.

## Helen and Newton Harrison at Ronald Feldman

What, beyond mere breast-beating, can art add to the ecological discussion? This question has preoccupied Helen and Newton Harrison for more than three decades. Their answer, which continues to evolve, was strikingly illustrated in this exhibition documenting several of their recent projects. The title of the show was "Changing the Conversation," a phrase that gets at the essence of their approach to a problem: they see themselves as catalysts whose outsider status allows them to offer insights or reformulations that might be impossible for those who are more technically trained or more closely tied to local politics. Solutions, the Harrisons believe, will evolve from conversations among all concerned.

Dealing here with such diverse ecological trouble spots as Tibet, Berlin, Pasadena and the Sava River in northern Yugoslavia, they consider not only the dangers posed by urbanism and industry but also these sites' historical and mythological contexts and current uses, and the possibilities for renewal inherent in natural processes.

The Sava River project was the

most thoroughly documented here, by means of photographs and texts that took up the front room of the gallery. Treated for years merely as a dumping ground for waste generated by coal mines, fertilizer factories, paper mills and even an atomic energy plant, and disrupted by dams and canals built for flood control, the Sava has become nearly dead to animal and plant life. Rather than idealistically pleading for the river to be returned to a state of purity, the Harrisons propose that it be viewed as an ecosystem. They suggest as ways that the pernicious effects of man and industry can be mitigated that organic farming be introduced at the periphery of a nature reserve (an innovation that would reduce toxic wastes while bringing local farmers into the organic-food market) or that waters warmed by an atomic power plant be used as a holding tank for warm-water fish.

Photographs and texts were arranged in a narrative fashion, so that the viewer literally followed the progress of the river downstream to the point where the Sava joins the Danube in Belgrade. One saw both the beauty and the tragic despoliation of the river while reading texts of conversations between the artists and various scientists and engineers, in which the river's problems and its future are discussed. Thus as we followed the course of the river, we also followed the progress toward possible restoration.

The Harrisons' own practice is a model of the organic approach

they would like to see applied to ecological problems. To answer the opening question: the artist's most important contribution to the ecological debate consists not so much of objects or concrete proposals as of creative thought. —Eleanor Heartney