



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Berlin—Trümmerflora on the Topographie des Terrors (Berlin—Rubble flowers on the topography of terror)*, 1988–89, photomontages, drawings, sculpture, and text. Installation view.

**HELEN MAYER
HARRISON/
NEWTON HARRISON**

RONALD FELDMAN
FINE ARTS

For two decades the Harrisons have collaborated on environmental projects throughout the world that have anticipated fleeting moments of global consciousness provoked by various ecological crises. "Changing the Conversation," the title of their recent show of proposals and projects in process, refers to their role as agents who stimulate a dialogue with a community in order to counter assumptions that inform widespread inertia. Their work frequently prescribes a major landscape adjustment, and it is their dialogue that guides and generates these interventions.

The main room was dedicated to their project for the Sava River in Yugoslavia, 1988–90. A series of panels using collaged, panoramic photographs, expository texts, reports of conversations, and philosophical musings describes a process of discovery and problem solving that led to modest but effective solutions. The Sava begins at two northern sources that join to form one of the largest alluvial floodplains in Europe and terminates at the Danube in Belgrade. The entire length of the river is an imperiled environment. Local industries, including a coal mine, paper mill, and atomic-energy plant, have polluted and warmed the water; an extensive network of dams and canals has been built to control the seasonal flooding of plains; and modern farming practices have dangerously altered the environment. The forest area and many forms of wildlife are in dramatic decline.

For over two years the Harrisons made trips to the Sava region, studied and docu-

mented sites on the river, and met with residents of the area. Their conversations with the agricultural and industrial communities have shaped an inclusive vision for the area that treats the river as a complex continuum. Their involvement has enhanced awareness while proposing environmental remedies including a reed bed and swamp-purifying network of holding ponds for the warmed effluence from the atomic power plant.

A recent proposal involves the elevated plateau region of Tibet. The Dalai Lama has proposed an enormous peace park for the unusual site, and the Harrisons were brought in to do first-stage, investigative work on Tibet's high ground—an area that they describe as the hardest to generate and the easiest to lose. Their aim was to kindle ecological consciousness in an area degraded by overgrazing, abusive agriculture, and deforestation. The documentation includes maps of the region as well as drawings, the abstractions of cartography and the intimate reportage of freehand drawings share equal ground. Their research not only addresses questions local to the geography of the region but provokes consideration of the ways that the world's oceans constantly reinscribe landmasses and of how jet streams have affected climatic conditions worldwide.

Artists who choose to address conditions in the world must perpetually reinvent their roles and reevaluate their processes for different situations. Conventional measurements of esthetic potency don't provide much illumination where activism is concerned. The Harrisons' work invites communities to accept and direct their collective authority to influence environmental factors. These artists function as catalysts; they move into a site, and the discourse they nurture realigns the relations between human action and regional form. They then depart, often leaving little

evidence except the promise of activity based on self-conscious programs of renewal.

—Patricia C. Philli,