

Art in America

OCTOBER 2003



FRANZ WEST DILLER + SCOFIDIO

VALENCIA BIENNIAL DALI'S "VENUS" PAVILION

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Art in America

October 2003

Diller + Scofidio: Critical Structures by *Tom McDonough* 90

This cross-disciplinary architectural team was recently given a retrospective by the Whitney Museum.

Franz West's Corporeal Comedy by *Robert Storr* 96

The author wonders how West's gawky, anti-monumental sculptures would fare as public art.

Materialist by *Lilly Wei* 100

Tara Donovan's labor-intensive installations involve vast accumulations of everyday stuff.

Gee's Bend Modern by *Richard Kalina* 104

A touring show highlights the boldly abstract quilts of this rural Alabama community.

Carlo Maria Mariani's Eternal Cities by *David Ebony* 110

Known for his Neo-Classical-style figures, an Italian painter pays homage to post-9/11 New York.

Mapping a Better World by *Eleanor Heartney* 114

Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison make environmental art that is both utopian and pragmatic.

Beyond Easy Pleasures by *Robert Berlind* 120

Wolf Kahn's modernist-inflected landscape paintings hint at deeper meanings.

Letters 31

Front Page 35

Kirk Varnedoe, 1946-2003 39
by *Marcia E. Vetrocq*

John Coplans, 1920-2003 43
by *Peter Plagens*

Review of Books 124
Carter Ratcliff on *Ann Reynolds's* Robert Smithson:
Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere; *Raphael*
Rubinstein on *Uwe Koch's* Annotated Catalogue Raisonné
of the Books by Martin Kippenberger 1977-1997

Report from Valencia 56
City of Dreams by *Richard Vine*



Cover: Franz West, *Corona*, 2002, enamel on aluminum, 16½ by 23 by 23 feet; installed in the Museums Quartier, Vienna, 2003.
Photo Robert Rubak, Vienna. Courtesy Franz West, Vienna/Gagosian Gallery, New York. See article beginning on page 104.

Report from Houston 64
Learning from Comics by *Frances Colpitt*

Annals of Surrealism 70
Dalí's Folly by *Lewis Kachur*

Report from Hanoi 77
Making It New by *Joe Fyfe*

Report from Palm Beach 84
Smith-o-rama by *Joan Pachner*

Review of Exhibitions 124
New York, Philadelphia, Boston,
Washington, Atlanta, Chicago,
St. Louis, Phoenix, Los Angeles,
Venice, Santa Monica, San Francisco,
Portland, London, Glarus, Berlin

Artworld 168

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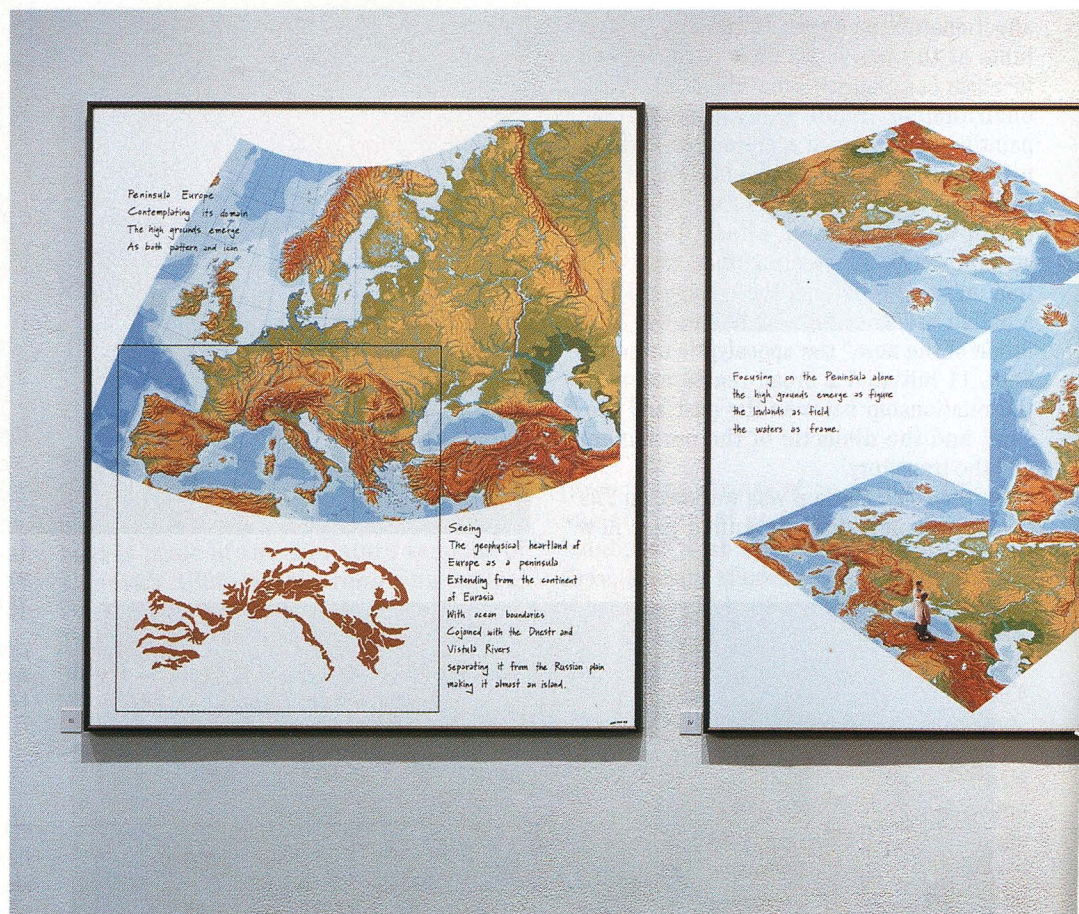
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Mapping a Better World

Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison's first solo show in New York in 10 years, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, opened with a circular map of the earth, installed on a wall facing the entrance. Measuring 86 inches in diameter, the Harrisons' global map was centered on a point that appeared to be somewhere in the vicinity of Prague. With Europe taking center stage, distortions resulting from the flat depiction of a curving earth turned Africa into a disproportionately large land mass, while Asia sprawled to the east and North America almost disappeared as it slipped out of sight. In the context of recent events, from the war in Iraq to the debate over America's imperialist intentions and the rift between Europe and the U.S., this opener served as a reminder that maps are not simply neutral topographical charts or location finders. They also function as political tools, shaping our perceptions of center and periphery, foreground and background.

During the three-and-a-half-decade career of this husband-and-wife team, maps have loomed large. Often beginning with preexisting maps, the artists extensively rework them, redrawing, digitally altering, painting over and reorienting the original images so that familiar landmarks such as cities, borders and roads tend to disappear while little-noticed topographical and land-use patterns come to the fore. Pioneers of "Eco" art, the Harrisons use maps to emphasize one of their ongoing themes—namely, the arbitrary nature of national boundaries and the way they often hinder ecologically responsible thinking.

Since the 1970s, the San Diego-based Harrisons have traveled to coal mines in the former East Germany, the banks of the Sava River in ex-Yugoslavia and the farms of middle England. They have parsed environmental reports, toured watersheds and endangered waterways, conferred with specialists, presented their ideas about environmental renewal in town meetings. Their work involves extended, frequently multi-year discussions with government officials, engineers, ecologists and residents of far flung ecosystems. The visual-art component of their activities consists of maps, charts and explanatory texts that set out ideas as products of a meandering conversation between the artists

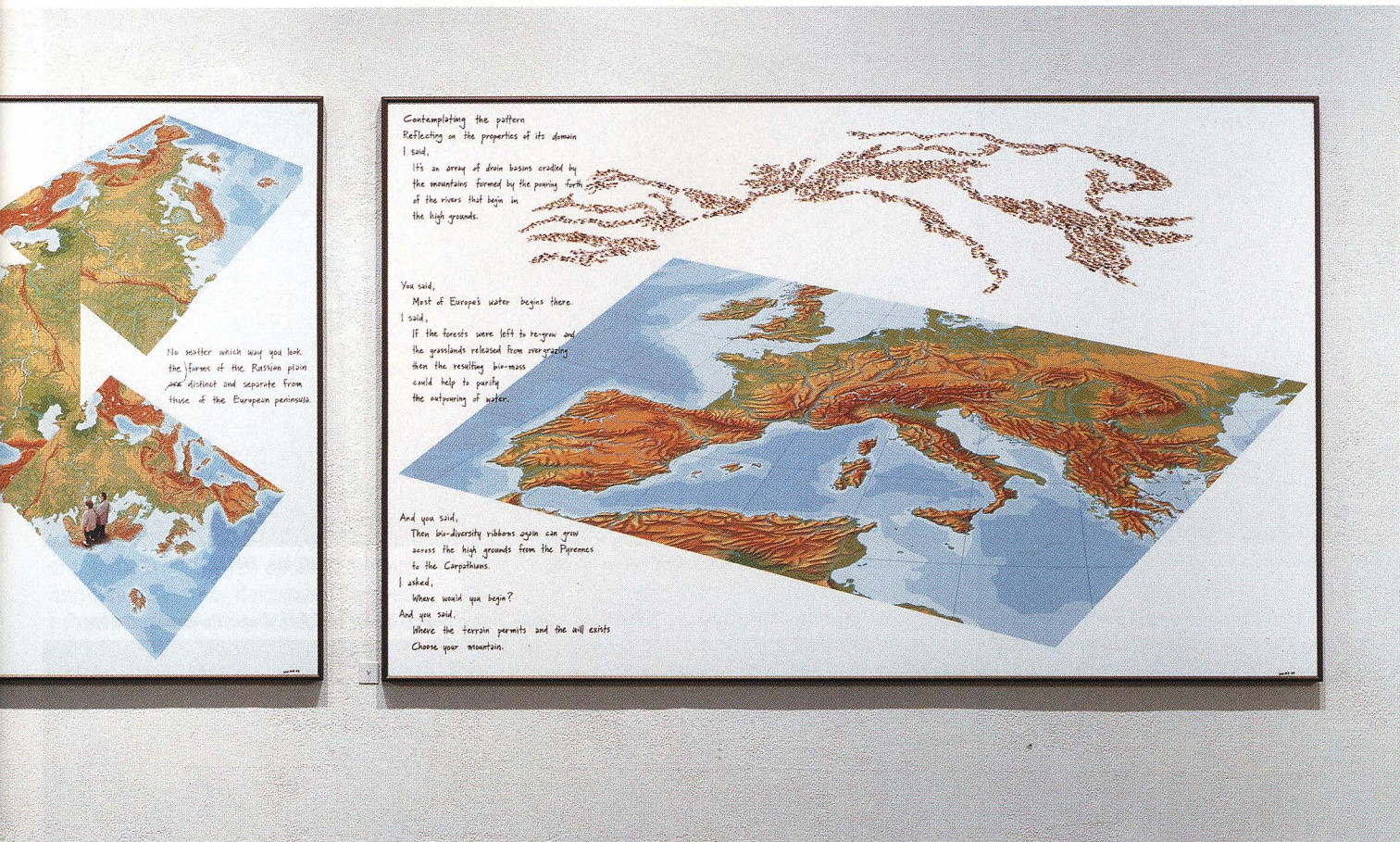


and other interlocutors. Because the Harrisons see themselves primarily as instigators and problem solvers, they measure their success not by the full realization of their ambitious proposals, but by the insertion of their ideas into larger political and social debates. They are satisfied if only certain elements of a project are taken up in a process of incremental change which they term "conversational drift," and they do not mind if others take credit for their ideas.

As a larger phenomenon—one hesitates to call it a movement—Eco art is at once idealistic and practical, involving a scattered group of artists who draw on environmental science in the interest of land restoration or reclamation. Alan Sonfist, Mierle Ukeles, Mel Chin, Patricia Johanson, Jackie Brookner and Agnes Denes are among its notable figures. An outgrowth of and reaction to the short-lived Land art movement of the late 1960s, Eco art also draws on that era's fascination

More than 30 years ago, Helen and Newton Harrison decided to devote themselves to environmentally beneficial art. Their latest project, "Peninsula Europe," envisions nothing less than the greening of most of an entire continent.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY



Above, left to right, Newton & Helen Mayer Harrison: *Seeing, From a Bird's Eye View*, and *Thinking*, all 2003, digital photographs and ink, each 36 inches high, from the "Peninsula Europe" project, 2000-ongoing. All photos Dennis Cowley. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

with what Lucy Lippard called the "dematerialization of art." Another influence was Rosalind Krauss's contemporaneous notion of the "expanded field," which dramatically enlarged the definition of "sculpture" to encompass engagement with landscape and architecture. Artist Robert Smithson was a significant precursor: his theories of entropy and engagement with sites of industrial devastation offered models for thinking about the relation of nature and culture. Equally important in shaping the direction of Eco art has been its "evil twin"—the monumental approach of artists like Michael Heizer and James Turrell, whose bulldozers were viewed by early practitioners of Eco art as evidence of Western culture's arrogant and instrumental attitude toward nature. By contrast, Eco art, with an occasional flirtation with New Age rhetoric, has always sought to heal the earth from the wounds inflicted by civilization.

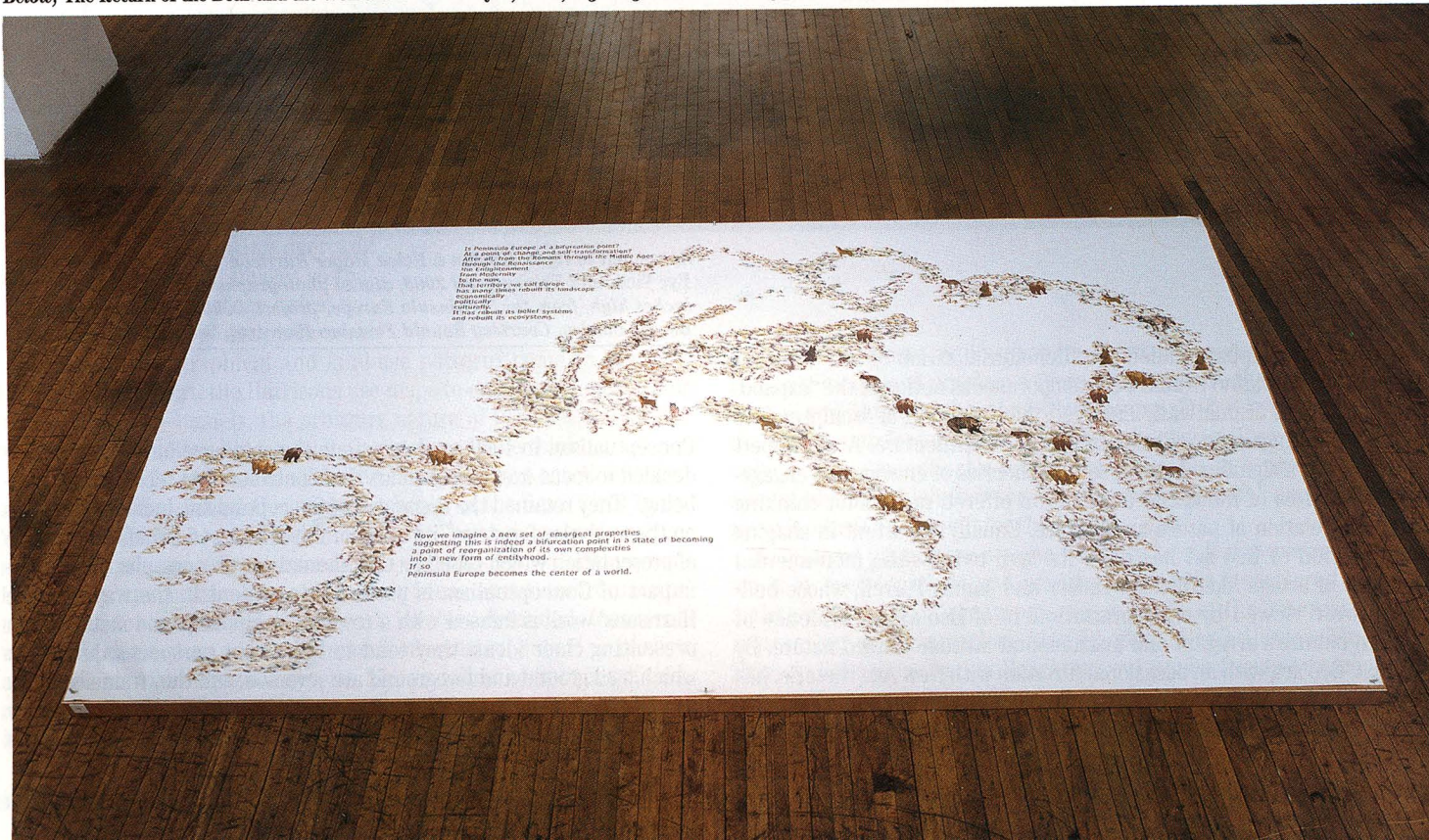
The Harrisons' embrace of ecology followed an early engagement with

Conceptualism. In 1969, as they note in the catalogue for this show, they decided to focus exclusively on art that contributed to "ecosystemic well-being." They retained the apparatus of Conceptualism, including its focus on the analysis of systems, its questioning of received beliefs and a mode of presentation which relied on documentation, photographs, charts. The impact of Conceptualism is particularly evident in the way that the Harrisons' work is infused with a respect for language and metaphor. In presenting their ideas, they tend to talk about perspectival shifts in which background and foreground are reversed, and they frame complex sets of recommendations in simple visual or poetic images. Explanatory texts frequently take the form of dialogues between the artists, with



Above, several map-based elements of "Peninsula Europe," including (on floor) modified GIS map on canvas-backed paper under Plexiglas, 2001, 13 by 12 1/2 feet.

Below, The Return of the Bear and the Wolf and Even the Lynx, 2001, digitally altered drawing printed on canvas-backed paper, 5 1/2 by 10 1/2 feet, from "Peninsula Europe."



statements and questions preceded by “I said” and “you said.” For the Feldman show, this quality was enhanced by recordings of the two reciting their texts in conversational tones.

The exhibition offered a survey of recent projects with an emphasis on one named “Peninsula Europe,” which looks at Europe as an ecological whole rather than a collection of distinct and often embattled countries. Map, photo and sound installations relating to this project dominated the front gallery, while the back gallery provided an overview of another major scheme, “A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland” (1995-96). Other related projects in which the Harrisons’ ideas were embodied at a smaller scale appeared throughout the two rooms.

“Peninsula Europe” was initiated at the request of a German foundation, the Schweisfurth-Stiftung, for presentation at the 2000 World’s Fair in Hannover. It focuses on the rivers and mountain ranges that preceded Europe’s national boundaries and will long outlast them. Essentially, the project is a 50-year plan to link the drain basins and forests of Europe from the Pyrenees to the Carpathians, transforming them into a series of “biodiversity ribbons.” Highland areas would be reforested to create a filter through which rain and groundwater could be purified for use in the more populated valleys and lowlands. Land would be further revitalized by restoring wetlands and bringing back ecologically responsible land uses.

The plan contains many of the Harrisons’ familiar themes. Here, as in other proposals, they advocate allowing nature to repair itself through the reintroduction of diverse species of flora and fauna to areas devastated by overpopulation or industrial pollution. They support “green” farming, and promise new revenues and jobs from ecotourism and the sale of organic produce and purified water. They also argue that the apparently prohibitive costs of such undertakings are in fact far less than the eventual costs of simply doing nothing.

At Feldman, the Harrisons made the case for “Peninsula Europe” with a series of map-based installations. The recurring motif in each was a shape created by isolating the mountain ranges of the region against a blank ground. Familiar national outlines disappear as a linear design emerges that suggests the skeletal remains of some ancient mammal. (The head is formed by the mountain ranges of Spain, a foreleg runs the length of Italy and the hindquarters encircle Eastern Europe and the Balkans.) This “icon,” as the Harrisons refer to it, symbolizes and encompasses a border-free Europe.

On one wall, the Harrisons paired a conventional map of Europe with one in which the icon has been isolated. Another map titled *The Return of the Bear and the Wolf and Even the Lynx* (2001), installed on a low-lying, wedge-shaped platform, presented the icon with pictures of wild animals painted over it to reflect the return of indigenous species to the highlands. Another map showed the icon as negative space and emphasized the lowlands instead, thereby making Europe resemble a kind of jigsaw puzzle. Yet another included a large

By isolating Europe’s mountain ranges against a blank ground, the Harrisons created a motif that resembles the skeletal remains of an ancient mammal.

map set under plastic on the floor which viewers could walk over to seek out towns and rivers of the area under consideration. A “listening pad” at the edge of this map was placed directly under a pair of speakers, which transmitted a recording of the Harrisons explaining the work.

The back gallery’s “A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland” is a



On walls, elements from the project “Casting a Green Net: Can It Be We Are Seeing a Dragon?,” 1998, including, on right, topographical map with hand coloring mounted on canvas, 10½ by 15 feet.

project for which the pair won the Groeneveld Prize, an honor associated with the Dutch Department of Agriculture, in 2002. This work, developed at the request of the Cultural Council of South Holland, was designed to address the problem of urban sprawl anticipated in the wake of the expected addition of 600,000 houses to the central lowlands over the next 20 years. Having initially been accepted in its entirety by the Dutch Ministry of the Environment, the Harrisons’ plan was abandoned after a change of government. More recently, it’s been put back on the table.

The large corner installation provided two competing visions of the future. On the wall to the left was a large map showing, according to the Harrisons’ predictions, what Holland would look like were the new homes to be built without deference to ecological considerations. Titled “Bad Government,” this map was printed in reverse to suggest the backward nature of such unbridled development.

To the right was the Harrisons’ plan, designated “Good Government,”

The Harrisons have long grappled with the challenge of dramatizing complex ecological proposals—this was one of their most lucid presentations to date.

in which the existing “green heart” has been left essentially undeveloped, preserving the zone’s traditional mix of open parks and farmland. In this map, the verdant center is surrounded by a green biodiversity ring like the one featured in “Peninsula Europe.” Ribbonlike green strips emanate from the ringlike rays radiating from the sun. These are green areas which would separate more congested urban zones from each other. The Harrisons argue that these strips of green would contribute to natural purification of air and water, while warding off a future in which central Holland is transformed, largely thanks to suburbanization, into a megalopolis. The green strips also provide some of the funding for the plan by providing fresh water for residents and industry.

A large section of floor in front of the maps was covered with a walk-on, laminated aerial photograph of the area as it was in 1994, when the “Green Heart” project was originally made public. Transparent overlays of green designated the bands that the Harrisons propose to return to nature. When the work was first presented in Holland, residents could locate their homes and see whether they fell within the restored area. (According to the plan, extant homes within this restored area could remain.) An accompanying video offered views of the central “Green Heart” as it is today, while another listening pad permitted viewers to hear the Harrisons describe the history of the project.

Rounding out the exhibition were installations offering more abbreviated accounts of other recent proposals. In the front room, two other river plans were presented. The Mulde River in Germany, designated here as “The Worst of Places,” is the site of a former coal mine which has poisoned both earth and water. The situation there is so dire that, as the wall text noted, the milk of cows grazing nearby had to be taken to the toxic waste dump. Here the Harrisons offered only very modest hopes for restoration, proposing to begin with the small area that still yields clean water.

By contrast, “The Best of Places” was a map-and-text installation devoted to the Sava River, which runs through the former Yugoslavia. The Harrisons propose to restore the river, which has been injured but not destroyed by industrial farming, by enlarging an extant nature corridor and setting up a series of ponds to create a reed-bed purification system. Photographs taken along the edges of the Sava River map revealed the amazing diversity of its existing ecosystems.

Also on view, in the back gallery, was documentation of “Casting a Green Net: Can it Be We are Seeing a Dragon?” (1998), a proposed project in Britain which would connect Liverpool and Leeds. As with “Green Heart,” this work deals with alternatives to unplanned urban development. Following the old Roman roads still discernible in this region, and marking the estuaries, the Harrisons discovered a shape on the map that took on the outlines of a dragon, with a small lake for an eye and a pair of extended wings. The dragon metaphor appealed to the artists because

it recalled ancient myths of the dragon as the spirit of nature banished from the land by the rise of civilization. Here, they proposed that the existing meadows and woodlands within the dragon’s outlines be allowed to spread and intermingle with farms and pastures, which would be worked organically. This, they argue, would eventually restore eroded topsoil, increasing the productivity of the land.

The Harrisons’ work raises a number of interesting questions. One that they repeatedly encounter has to do with the definition of their activity: why should what they do be considered art and not science, environmentalism or land development? In response, the Harrisons point out that, generally, their projects are initiated at the invitation of arts groups hoping to play a role in larger planning issues. They maintain that their position as artists allows them to cut through red tape, ignore professional territorialism and present ideas in a form that general audiences can understand.

This last point leads to the second set of questions, having to do with presentation. How does one dramatize complex ecological proposals? How can such ideas be presented without bogging down in incomprehensible details? The Harrisons have struggled for years with this issue, and here they came up with one of the most lucid presentations of their proposals to date. Texts were pared down from far more voluminous explanations available in accompanying catalogues, and the maps were allowed to tell a great deal of the story. Listening pads and walk-on floor elements acted as lures to literally bring viewers into the works.

But if the presentation was simple and direct, the underlying problems of bringing these projects to fruition are monumentally complex, leading to another set of questions. How feasible are the changes advocated by the Harrisons? Is it reasonable to expect governments to pur-

Digitally modified aerial photographs with hand coloring, 41 1/4 by 44 1/4 inches overall, from the “Krimpenerwaard” project, 2002.





Installation view of "A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland," 1995-96, showing (on floor) aerial photograph on Delft ceramic tiles with green overlays, 21½ feet square.

chase land to create nature reserves, to plant forests to hold water, to replace stopgap flood control methods currently in place in heavily urbanized areas with natural methods which will require displacement of citizens, to abandon ecologically damaging job opportunities for more beneficent ones? Isn't it utopian to expect bureaucrats to put aside political and territorial boundaries? In a world in which jobs, especially political jobs, seem increasingly short-term, is long-term thinking a practical possibility?

Certainly in the context of present-day America, such ideas seem hopelessly visionary, which may explain why most of the Harrisons' projects have originated in Europe (They are, however, at work on a small project in Santa Fe.) But where there is a receptive government or populace, the pair can point to some real-world accomplishments. The "Green Heart" project, for instance, was immediately embraced by Holland's Green Party, and has gone through various ups and downs with a succession of governments. Today, elements of this proposal, among them the preservation of the country's center, the physical separation of cities and the redirection of new development, have become part of the government's plan for this area.

The Sava project was interrupted by war in the Balkans, but the ideas outlined by the Harrisons are being implemented on the Drava River, a tributary of the Danube that flows through Slovenia and Croatia. Meanwhile, "Peninsula Europe," which is only a year old, has already led a number of smaller local projects throughout the European Union.

Thus, if the Harrisons are utopian, they have one foot in the real world. Change is possible, they argue, and they offer numerous practical suggestions. At a time when so many prognostications about the future condition of the planet seem unrelievedly gloomy, Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison remind us that we are still masters of our fate. □

"Peninsula Europe" was on view at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York [Apr. 12-May 10]. The project will be the subject of forthcoming exhibitions in Toulouse, Athens and Munich. Other projects by the Harrisons will be presented at the Santa Fe Art Institute [2004], St.-Pieters Abbey, Ghent, Belgium [2005], and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, Belgium [2005]. They are also included in a group exhibition opening Oct. 4 at the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers.

Author: Eleanor Heartney is the author of Postmodernism, published by the Tate Gallery and Cambridge University Press (2000).