

IMPROVISING THE FUTURE: THE ECO-AESTHETICS OF NEWTON AND HELEN HARRISON

LINDA MCGREEVY

We don't do a work unless it's embedded in an act of healing.

—Newton Harrison

If it is a "New Age," if the physicists and neuroscientists are correct in hypothesizing that we are in the midst of a "paradigm shift" that should have a profound impact on our collective view of experiential reality, if we long for the artists who will explore and express this transformed future . . . then it is time, indeed a time long overdue, for the art world to stop affirming the Baudrillardian deconstructive line that envisions a hopelessly media-saturated, commodified art. We have a need for transformative artists.

Two of them have, in fact, been active for almost twenty years in the ever shifting shapes of "the Lagoon-Maker" and "the Witness," the evocative aliases of Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison who practice what their German counterpart Joseph Beuys called "social sculpture," a virtually unclassifiable merger of the visual with the verbal arts, science with arcane philosophies, and politics with performance. Their dialectical interactions, on both personal and public levels, have been improvisatory, a mutational exploration of the expanding niches of life. The process has enveloped and enriched their lives, which, on the deepest levels, have become intertwined with the cultural mythos in revolution around the principles of the male and female, art and nature, and the past as it unfolds to the future. They seek a new Eden, but without the starry-eyed crackpotology of many futurists. Both Harrisons, as eclectic intellectual artists, are firmly rooted in a critical dialogue. Their personas, exemplified by the Lagoon-Maker/Witness collaboration on their pivotal ten-year project, the Lagoon Cycle, engage in a kind of sustaining self-criticism which maintains their honesty and creates a vital, dynamic metaphor for their work together.

Metaphors, which form a component of their urban ecologies as well as of their interactive meditations, have an affinity to the holistic theories evolving from the Gaia Hypothesis (the latter posits the regenerative and interlocking powers of the earth as a living entity). Their work also has affinities to the visionary brain-as-a-hologram theory advanced by Karl Pribram and David Bohm, and to Claude Lévi-Strauss's research into the effectiveness of tribal shamans. The Harrisons practice an ecoaesthetics that transcends the categories decreed by critics, curators, and dealers, and in the process they have unfortunately fallen through the cracks in the art world. Viewed as hybrids—neither fish nor fowl, artists nor scientists—the pair have led a suspiciously fluid life in art. However, it is precisely in this innovatively fluxional approach—encompassing art, poetry, ritual performance, ecology, dialectical philosophy, mechanics, photography, landscape, and alchemical concepts—that a viable future for art may lie.

Their continuing faith in improvisation has fueled over fifteen years of collaboration, with intermittent visibility (and notoriety) from 1971, when the so-called "Survival Pieces" began. But 1987 has been the Harrisons' most visible year, with a total of four major exhibitions, beginning in March with a retrospective of their projects at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, continuing with *Kassel Works* at Documenta 8 in the summer, and ending with a current pair on view in California: the Lagoon Cycle's appearance at the L.A. County Museum of Art and the presentation of the Devil's Gate solution for Pasadena, both of which open in November. This last conjunction is particularly apt, for it reveals the interlocking nature of the practical Harrisonian projects with the visionary aspects encapsulated in their Lagoon Cycle.

In the guise of "metaphorical planners," the Harrisons propose a type of urban ecology, interactions with governmental structures, community groups, and localized art support systems. For the Pasadena Devil's Gate—a hillside debris basin for the river originally planned for flood control during the Water Wars of the early 'teens and since left fallow—the pair plan a sculpted viperine habitat, complete with settling pond to satisfy aquifer needs, a double stream system, and a triadic walkway accommodating both riders and pedestrian traffic. Their patrons are composed of a small city committee supported by

a coalition of even smaller art groups; their opponents, the powerful Corps of Engineers, plan to dam the river in the next canyon above the Rose Bowl, which should doom the twenty-acre site to further erosion. At that point it is feared that "what has been done *cannot* be undone," a reversal of Newton Harrison's prescription for the *Arroyo Secco Release: A Serpentine for Pasadena* which was his first unsuccessful proposal put to the city in 1985. The Devil's Gate proposal is essentially a way of beginning again in Pasadena, an improvisation for both artists and city government, a way to generate a new niche for the artist/shaman to suggest an environmental healing. The Council is now interested—in a practical fashion—in a park for the site; the Harrisons are interested in no less than the integral revitalization of the Devil's Gate, at present an all-too-appropriate name for an urban wasteland.

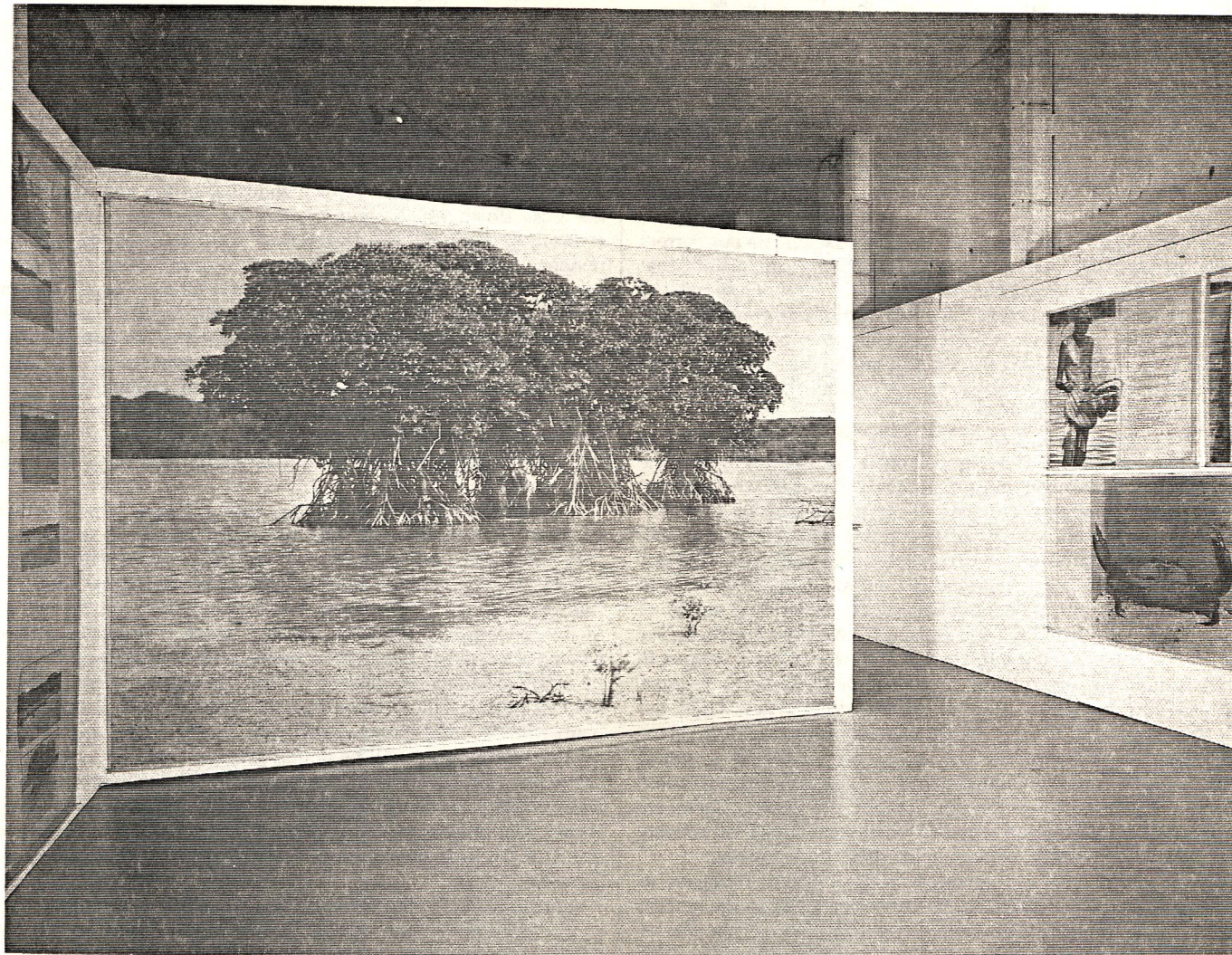
The multifaceted proposal for the city of Kassel which formed the Harrison's contribution to this year's Documenta 8 is in a similar therapeutic vein. As Nancy Marmer states in her often critical overview of the sprawling, concept-laden exhibition, the Harrisons' *Kassel Works* "may eventually have the most far-reaching effect on the city of any of the exhibition's urban art works,"¹ since it proposes a practical healing of the river's meandering banks, termed by the pair "the Garden of Extreme Means and Intensive Care," in effect a recentering of the old city's focus. Since Kassel was the target of both firebombing and deliberate flooding during World War II, the underlying therapeutic content of this work will be doubly historic (entirely consistent with the recent trend in Germany for remembering their past) and alchemical, recalling its elemental destruction by fire and water. The past would then mutate gradually into a healthy future for this venerable city and the long absent stork would return to its cleansed mating grounds.

A facet of the *Kassel Works*—the promenade or meander, restored by bridges and shelters—recalls the successful *Baltimore Promenade* which, in a very simple fashion, reestablished the connections between the harbor and the parks of the inner city, encouraging pedestrian traffic in an area typically ringed by massive highways. Another aspect, the Fulda River's revitalization, recalls the green spine of the *Guadalupe Meander: A Refugia for San Jose* proposed in two successive presentations entitled "Can It Be That You Have Forgotten Your River?" and the more ironic reaction to the city's lack of response, "Can It Be That You Have Forgotten What a River Is?"

In such pieces as these, and the forthcoming proposal for Tel Aviv, *On Dreaming the Yarkon River Alive Again*, with its decidedly shamanistic title, the Harrisons become, in essence, catalytic reconciliators, suggesting a synthesis of structure, establishments, and underlying belief systems presently locked in combat. Transformationists, in general, posit a paradigm shift in society away from reductive categorized competitiveness to a mutable state of interconnected cooperation. The Harrisons work assiduously on this level; that their proposals often fail to bear fruit is a factor of a recalcitrant system caught at the antithetical stage of the dialectic. Their visionary ecoaesthetic remains pure and healthy, awaiting future transformations.

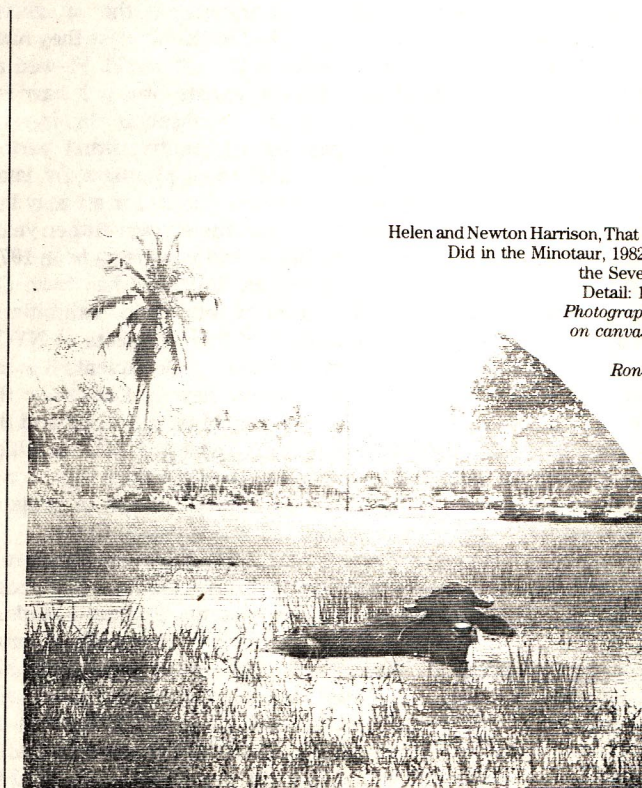
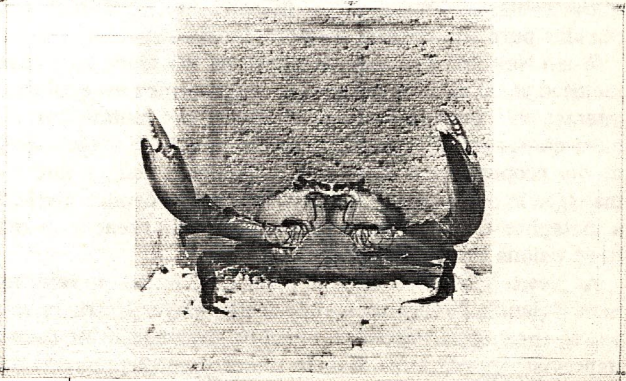
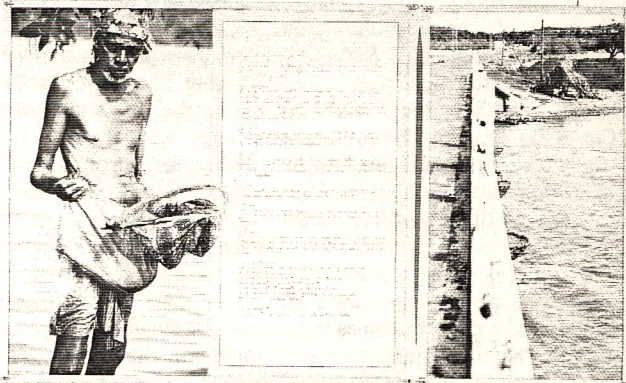
When Newton, the more garrulous of the team, says that the next hundred years must be devoted to improvising new ecologies that will interact with present technological states and mutate into new niches more consistent with planetary needs, he echoes the idealistic theories of the proponents of the Gaia Hypothesis, and he and Helen have managed in one intricate, mutative work, *The Lagoon Cycle*, to suggest a metaphor that combines practicality with dreams, to make art of their visions for the biosphere.

As Newton Harrison used to paint huge spirals in response to Kenneth Noland's circles, so he and Helen Mayer Harrison spiral in and out of their *opus magnum*, a public reinvention of their life as an improvisatory narrative. A suite of seven interconnected meditations on the ecosystem, in constant evolution between 1972 and 1983, it is a critical discourse between the "Lagoon-Maker" and the "Witness."



Helen and Newton Harrison, *First Lagoon*, Panel 7. *Photographic painting on canvas. 75 x 60".* Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Helen and Newton Harrison, *Installation*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.



Helen and Newton Harrison, *That Did in the Minotaur*, 1982. *the Seven*. Detail: *Photographic painting on canvas.*

Ron

We have a need for transformative artists. Two such artists are Helen and Newton Harrison in their social sculpture of the environment and aesthetics.

It's rather like the little crab that generated a greater one in the process of molting and grows in active bursts. On the most mundane level, the Harrisons have been cultivating their scientific and technological aspirations, growing hardy little crabs (*Scylla Serrata*) from Sri Lanka, garnering grants, and creating portable survival systems. At a deeper stratum, the suite is a poetic metaphor of the total interrelatedness of life on this fragile, flexible planet, Gaia-Earth; it is a transformationist epic that spirals from the microcosmos of the individual, crab-infested lagoon to the macrocosmos of the Pacific's alembic Ring of Fire.

Their reflexive strategy incorporates the alchemical fusion of male and female principles into an androgynous whole through their interactive personas: one an active extroverted performer—the deviser or Lagoon-Maker; the other contemplative, an introverted synthesizer—the dreamer or Witness. Their process in metaphor, dream, parable, and allegory, in art as well as science, is analogical, utilizing the notion described by Gregory Bateson in which it is “assumed that certain formal characteristics of one component will be mirrored in the other.”²

The Lagoon is a kind of stacked metaphor. Embedded on one level is an analogy to the rich mix of human cultures and ecocultures; on a deeper level the work refers to the Pribram/Bohm theory of the interconnectedness of brain functions long thought to be separate. Analytic and holistic patterns are unified with intellectual and intuitive modes in the Cycle's interaction between the Lagoon-Maker and the Witness. Ultimately the suite reflects Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the *noosphere*, an invisible planetary web of evolving consciousness in Pribram's holographic ocean of energy.³ The energy of the *Lagoon Cycle* is open-ended, expressive of the complexity of a collaborative creation.

The Harrison's collaboration began in 1972 with a trip to Sri Lanka to gather the crabs the Lagoon-Maker (Newton) needed for a Survival Piece. While the Witness (Helen) had not worked with him before this, she now joined him in a dialogue on the culture of the region, bringing her knowledge of social anthropology and comparative literature to temper his practicality. What resulted was a narrative composed of 350 feet of photo-text panels spanning a ten-year period.⁴

The First Lagoon: The Lagoon at Upouveli, with its delicately tinted panels, continues the metaphor of survival established in Newton's work since 1970, an evolution of his portable fish farms, microbiospheres that intrigued scientists, but invariably confused and/or appalled the art world. The hardy Sri Lanka crab, adaptable to wide ranges of temperature and pollution levels, becomes the subject of this first episode of the Cycle, a metaphor for improvisational survival.

Helen, in her persona of Witness, immediately immerses herself in the region's ancient culture which is besieged by technocratic modernity. Her fascination with this blend of mythos and reality begins to propel the *First Lagoon* into a dialogue spiralling from the natives to her counterpart, the practical, enthusiastic Lagoon-Maker. This dialogue begins to take on the improvisational call-and-response pattern characteristic of the entire Cycle, though here it is permeated with facts, softened by the Witness's poetic chants. In the symbolic colors of the country's flag, the Newtons find the passion and wisdom that will support them, symbolized by an ancient golden lion on a field of blood red from a “land known to the Romans as Taprobane, to the Arabs as the resplendent land, Serendip . . .” (a name that has long connoted the desirable discoveries made by chance, or a fruitful improvisation).

But the *First Lagoon* ends on a quirky projection from the Lagoon-Maker: “How will a crab know it's not a Lagoon?” a question answered in the second, implementational installment. The *Second Lagoon* is almost entirely a utilitarian construction, being a documentation of the lures of technology. As the artificial environment for the crabs is built, and their interrupted cycle “repaired” by the introduction (by garden hose) of the triggering monsoon season, a Sea Grant from the prestigious Scripps Institution is procured. Art facilitates science—almost inadvertently. Were it not for the skepticism of the Witness, who

questions objectivity in the project (noting the crabs' deviant behavior in the tank—they “look up for food” as if fed by manna from heaven), this would be an unbalanced segment of the Cycle.

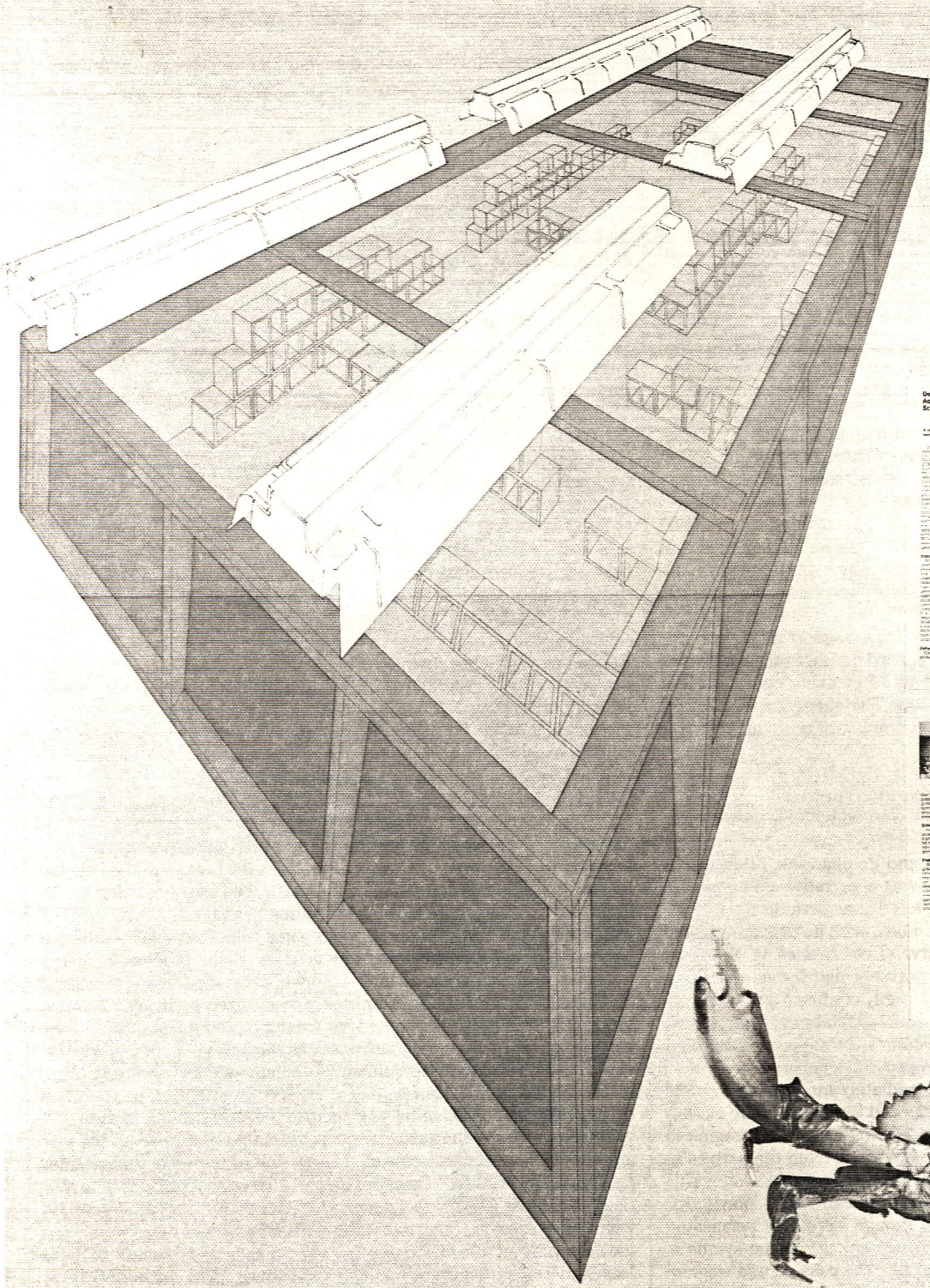
With *The Third Lagoon (The House of Crabs)*, interaction with the scientific and business communities becomes a further lure for the Harrisons, who struggle with the practical fall-out of the Sea Grant. This implementational stage is the result of the previous one and it is the Witness who clarifies the Lagoon-Maker's growing alarm. In the face of a paranoid scientist who fears his privileged information would be overwhelmed by theirs, a Thai restaurateur with a yen for crabs who is blown away by rival gangsters, and an accountant eager to invest in a losing proposition for a group of physicians in search of a tax shelter, the pair decide that the practical application of the small ecosystem is “too narrow a space to play in,” nonimprovisational, lacking in empathy. It is at this pivotal point of conflict that the Cycle begins to become visionary, stretching the metaphor and questioning the methodologies.

The Fourth Lagoon, subtitled *On Mixing, Mapping, and Territory*, is a crucial visualization of this alteration of mood and scale. If the previous projects were ultimately rendered impractical by the devious desires of potential clients, then the Harrisons would replace them with an estuarial system that would demand a larger view of its function—an ecological overview. This Lagoon, a proposal to revitalize the Salton Sea with a life chain of fifteen ponds for plankton, oysters, and mussels, and the ubiquitous *Scylla Serrata*, is the last of the synthetic life-support systems devised by the Lagoon-Maker. His hope to breed the hardiest creatures, to make the desert bloom, is countered by the objections of the Witness, who reminds him of the chain of existing systems that will inevitably increase pollution.

This cautionary interjection leads to the proposals contained in *The Fifth Lagoon: From the Salton Sea to the Pacific; From the Salton Sea to the Gulf*, which racks the focus back, pulling up to a vaster landscape of the lower California Coast, with the blue of the Sea almost lost in the saffron-tinted curve of the earth. The Lagoon-Maker's ever practical voice proposes to flush the Salton Sea by way of an all-American canal which will channel the wastes into the larger bodies of water. But the Witness counters by analogy. If the process is similar to that of cleansing a septic tank, who will flush the Ocean in its turn? The activist Lagoon-Maker, admittedly hypnotized by his accelerating system, is brought to his senses by these pointed questions, and the project comes to a contemplative halt as the soft voice of the Witness asks him, “how did you remember to remember?” in the midst of his technological trance. He responds: “By paying attention to you/Then by paying attention/Then by paying attention to paying attention . . .”

This inward-spiralling attentiveness leads to a discourse on the separation of creativity and consciousness, one of the false dichotomies pinpointed by Pribram's theory of mental interconnectedness. The Harrisons consider *The Sixth Lagoon (On Metaphor and Discourse)*, in which they most clearly reflect the Gaia Hypothesis in references to the “integrity of the discourse between Earth and Water,” to be a “mini-environmental impact study on creativity.” The maps of this Lagoon are overlaid in the post-Cubist systems used by NASA, delicately tinted pink over sepia, like blood pumping beneath the dark crust of the earth. The Witness further tames the Lagoon-Maker's ambitions as they make a pact to pay very specific attention to the “cost of belief” in manipulative systems.

The culminating Lagoon in the Cycle is an alchemical metaphor, a macrocosmic meditation on elementary mutability and improvisation on a planetary scale. *The Seventh Lagoon: The Ring of Fire/The Ring of Water* envisions the Pacific Ocean as an enormous estuarial lagoon, an alembic erupting with chthonic fires. Ideas that run throughout the Cycle—the flux of matter, the brevity of individual life spans, the necessity for improvisation, and for the dream—are recapitulated in this final piece. The Witness recounts a dream in which “the business of the universe is conducted in an odd kind of dialogue,” a metaphor



Development of a Commercial Aquaculture System for the Crab *Scylla serrata* (Forsk.)

A study was undertaken at the University of the Philippines, Los Baños, Laguna, to develop a commercial aquaculture system for the crab *Scylla serrata* (Forsk.)

The study was conducted in a series of experiments. The first experiment was to determine the optimal salinity for the growth of the crab. The second experiment was to determine the optimal temperature for the growth of the crab. The third experiment was to determine the optimal feeding regime for the crab. The fourth experiment was to determine the optimal stocking density for the crab. The fifth experiment was to determine the optimal water quality parameters for the crab.

Introduction and background

The crab *Scylla serrata* (Forsk.) is a highly valued crustacean in many parts of the world. It is a major source of protein and is also a popular delicacy. The demand for crab is increasing rapidly, and this has led to the development of a commercial aquaculture system for the crab.

Materials and methods

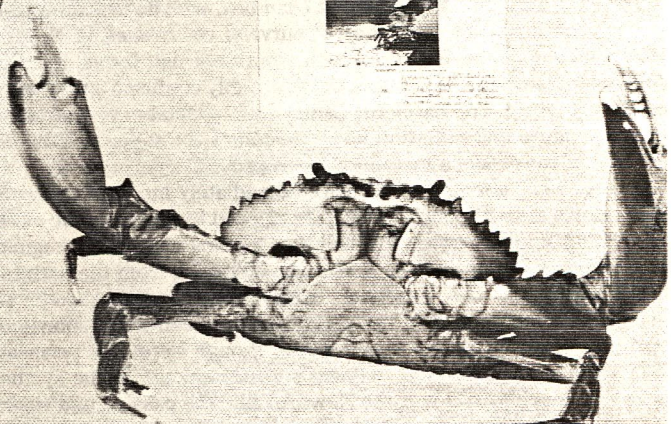
The study was conducted in a series of experiments. The first experiment was to determine the optimal salinity for the growth of the crab. The second experiment was to determine the optimal temperature for the growth of the crab. The third experiment was to determine the optimal feeding regime for the crab. The fourth experiment was to determine the optimal stocking density for the crab. The fifth experiment was to determine the optimal water quality parameters for the crab.

Results and discussion

The results of the study show that the optimal salinity for the growth of the crab is 20‰. The optimal temperature for the growth of the crab is 25°C. The optimal feeding regime for the crab is a diet consisting of 40% fish meal, 20% soybean meal, 10% rice bran, 10% molasses, and 10% vitamins and minerals. The optimal stocking density for the crab is 10 crabs per square meter. The optimal water quality parameters for the crab are a dissolved oxygen concentration of 5 mg/l, a pH of 7.5, and a water temperature of 25°C.

Conclusion

The study has shown that a commercial aquaculture system for the crab *Scylla serrata* (Forsk.) can be developed. The system should be based on the following principles: optimal salinity, optimal temperature, optimal feeding regime, optimal stocking density, and optimal water quality parameters.



Helen and Newton Harrison, Second Lagoon, Panel VII. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

merge to form a new metaphor: a double helix composed of their collaborative energy, a pattern that may well mutate into a vital transformational art for the future.

in itself for the Cycle. And the pair begins to circle back through all the lagoons to the first one with its crab, mangrove swamps, and the placid buffalo in its wallow, an interlocking chain of dependencies given an aesthetic dimension by this long, visual dream cycle. Completing this contracted spiral, Helen rotates outwardly in concert with Newton's energy, bursting into an antiphonal chant to the rising waters pushed from fiery depths.

In their trek through seven lagoons, their nearly mythic seven labors, the Harrisons become "cosmic storytellers" whose far-flung sources

1. Nancy Marmer, "Documenta 8: The Social Dimension?" *Art in America*, Vol. 75, no. 9 (September), 138.
2. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, New York, 1979, 142-143.
3. The Winter/Spring 1987 issue of *ReVision* (Vol. 9, no. 2) is devoted to "Gaian Consciousness" and includes several articles (Ralph Metzner's "Gaia's Alchemy: Ruin and Renewal of the Elements" is of particular interest) regarding this Hypothesis. An earlier issue of *ReVision* (Summer/Fall, 1978, Vol. 1, no. 3/4) focussed upon the holographic hypothesis, with articles on Pribram and an interview with Bohm.
4. For the complete text in conjunction with the panels, see Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Lagoon Cycle*, Cornell University, 1985, with a brilliant essay, "A Compendium of Possibilities," by Carter Ratcliff.