



# But is it

# *Art* ?



**The Spirit of Art  
as Activism**

*Edited by*  
**Nina Felshin**



## **Ecopolitics/Ecopoetry:**

### **Helen and Newton Harrison's Environmental Talking Cure**

Postmodern theory relegates nature to the junk heap of outmoded concepts. Declaring that “the jungle ride at Disney World may in fact be more real to most people than the real jungle in the Amazon,”<sup>1</sup> the prophets of simulation within the art world and the enthusiasts for industrial development without happily embrace a future in which nature is reinvented on a daily basis to conform to the requirements of technology and commerce.

Back in the discredited “real world,” however, the ozone layer continues to thin, rain forests turn into deserts, toxic waste threatens the groundwater upon which our cities depend, and species that may contain the cure to cancer or AIDS disappear before their beneficent properties can be discovered.

In light of such unhappy developments, an international environmental movement has emerged over the last three decades that seeks political and social changes in our treatment of the environment. Because of the complexity of the problems, a diverse and occasionally conflicting set of agendas and prescriptions has been set forth by various environmental groups. The Green Party, which has become a fixture in North America and Europe, espouses a platform of environmental action, conservation, deindustrialization, land reclamation, and social justice. Green Party candidates have been elected to political office in Canada, England, and Sweden, and the party has emerged as a major political player in Germany.

While the Green Party seeks politically viable approaches to environmental problems, other groups stake out less palatable philosophical positions. Movements like deep ecology and ecofeminism argue against the anthropomorphism and patriarchal bias embodied in our

practices of land use, noting that there is a connection between Western culture's exploitation of women and its exploitation of the earth. At the furthest extreme are groups such as Earth First that take the radical position that humankind has abdicated its rights to the earth. They advocate drastic population reduction and a return to a preindustrial state.

In the United States, environmental consciousness waxes and wanes with changes in the political climate. After an early surge of interest in environmental problems that culminated in the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1972, the business-oriented Republican administrations of the 1980s attempted to portray environmentalism as a choice between owls and jobs. In the 1990s, politicians have discovered that an expression of interest in an environmental agenda is frequently very attractive to a public disaffected with the politics of consumption that dominated the last decade.

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Among the general public, environmental consciousness has tended to oscillate between the two extremes of ecological despair (to borrow a phrase from artist Robert Smithson, who was himself an early advocate of land reclamation through art) and blind faith in technology's ability to save us from ourselves. Well-publicized scares—Love Canal, the odyssey of the garbage barge, the discovery of mercury in tuna—create momentary frenzies of ecological concern, but too often the apparently insurmountable problems that humankind's stewardship has visited upon the earth lead instead to a state of passive resignation.

Art has always had a special connection with the natural landscape. Is there an equally sympathetic place in the environmental debate for artists who wish to move beyond simple expressions of concern toward a more active and activist stance? Responding to this question, a small group of contemporary artists with roots in the activist tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s has begun to explore the possibility of practical links between art and ecology.

They argue that the artist's habits of metaphor, cross-reference, inclusiveness, and holistic thinking may help unclog a discourse that often finds itself mired in the narrow channels of technological and bureaucratic thinking. They hold that new conceptualizations of intractable environmental problems may lead to new solutions. And they have committed themselves to exposing to public view the debates that surround these issues in the belief that common sense and a proper understanding of our collective self-interest are the most potent weapons in the battle for ecological sanity.

### **Helen and Newton Harrison: Taking the Long View**

Among the first and the most visionary advocates of this approach are Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. A husband-and-wife team who shared a teaching position at the University of California in San Diego from 1969 to 1993, the Harrisons first began thinking about ecological issues in the early 1970s. This was a period when artistic opinion about the environment was dominated by artists such as Michael Heizer, whose *Double Negative* (1969) involved the displacement of 240,000 tons of earth in the Nevada desert; Walter De Maria, who set 400 steel poles in straight lines over a square mile of the New Mexico desert to draw lightning to his *Lightning Field* (1977); and Robert Smithson, whose *Spiral Jetty* (1970) was a giant coil of rock stretching from the shore into Utah's Great Salt Lake. Created to move art out of the gallery into the real world and to defy the turning of art into a commodity, projects like these also had a less savory side in their tendency to usurp the earth as just another kind of raw material available for artistic transformation and exploitation.

By contrast, the Harrisons took a much more beneficent and systemic view of the natural environment. An early ecological work was included in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1971 *Art and Technology* exhibition, a show that matched artists and scientists in collaborative teams. The Harrisons' work, entitled *Notation on the Eco System of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp*, studied the interaction of *Dunaliella* algae and ocean brine shrimp. This was a far cry from the repositioning of mounds of earth in the desert or the dredging of the ocean floor.

The Harrisons' growing interest in the complexity of ecological systems can be traced in *Lagoon Cycle*, an environmental narrative that they developed over the years 1973 to 1985. The earliest texts of *Lagoon Cycle* focus on the search for an organism that can live under museum conditions; as the narrative proceeds, however, the Harrisons continually widen the scope of their environmental concerns until they conclude with a discourse on the greenhouse effect and a consideration of the ecosystem of the entire Pacific Ocean. In a sense, *Lagoon Cycle* also chronicles the evolution of the Harrisons' environmental consciousness as they become increasingly aware of the need to think big and to question the ideas of specialists working on environmental problems. This outward expansion has led them into discussions with specialists from a variety of scientific, political, and sociological fields. And it has led them to promulgate ideas that have been adopted in part or in toto by city officials, despite the fact that they may contradict conventional wisdom.

Over the years, the Harrisons have developed a unique ecopolitics, couched in the form of an ecopoetry. Combining text with photographs, drawings, and maps, the Harrisons employ the language of storytelling to present the results of their investigations into a particular problem or a specific ecosystem. Each work is presented as a poetic dialogue woven together from diverse voices, including those of planners, ecologists, botanists, foresters, the artists themselves, and even the rivers and waterways whose histories and futures are under consideration. Borrowing promiscuously from other disciplines, the voices use metaphor, irony, and analogy to suggest new ecological strategies and approaches.

For example, in a 1992 work entitled *The Serpentine Lattice*, which deals with the Northwest rain forest, the Harrisons draw from the language of aesthetics to create a potent image of a new relationship between humankind and nature: "A new reversal of ground comes into being where human activity becomes a figure within an ecological field as simultaneously the ecology ceases being an ever shrinking figure within the field of human activity." In their *Great Lakes Proposal* from 1977, the authors reach into the world of geopolitics to make the argument, only partially tongue-in-cheek, that political boundaries should be redrawn along ecological lines. And in a third

work, *Sacramento Meditations*, also from 1977, they make use of the economist's language of cost-benefit analysis to argue that current flood-control policies are efficient only when such long-term effects as wetlands contamination and salinization of the soil are suppressed.

Though the Harrisons have occasionally dealt with issues like the deforestation of the Pacific Northwest, the defensive psychology of urban design, and the possibility of a memorial to the victims of Nazi atrocities created from rubble and scrub flowers on the former site of the SS headquarters, the Harrisons' most consistent subject has been a systemic analysis of watersheds here and abroad. They take issue with conventional thinking about flood control, irrigation, and land use, arguing that efforts to change the course of waterways, to make dry land productive, or to dry out wetlands to enable the expansion of urban boundaries ultimately breed disaster for both the land and its human inhabitants. Instead, they advocate various forms of restoration and reclamation to bring human needs back into synchronism with natural processes.

### **Sacramento Meditations: Assessing the Cost of Belief**

In 1976, the Harrisons created a work they regard as having been pivotal for their subsequent watershed investigations. *Sacramento Meditations* (1977) is a critique of the irrigation policies of the Sacramento–San Joaquin watershed in Northern California. This multidisciplinary project, which included a sixty-four-foot mural, a series of billboards, radio and television performances, a poster campaign, and a graffiti campaign, became a model for thinking about the relationship between ecology and urban development.

The work's overall question, as stated in a series of posters plastered around San Francisco, is: "What if all that irrigated farming isn't necessary?" Within the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the mural, comprising a series of nine texts accompanied by various mappings of the state of California, made the case for replacing the usual short-term thinking and special-interest politics with an understanding of the area's problems on a macro scale.

**The Harrisons advocate various forms of restoration and reclamation to bring human needs back into synchronism with natural processes.**



"Somebody's crazy! They're draining swamps and growing rice on the desert." So read Helen and Newton Harrison's graffiti scrawled on San Francisco streets during the 1977 run of *Sacramento Meditations*, their many-pronged attack on the folly of irrigation practices in the Sacramento-San Joaquin watershed in Northern California.

The second text of the work powerfully reveals the fallacies of conventional thinking:

"VISIONARY" PLANNERS INGENUOUSLY USING MODERN TECHNOLOGIES TO SECURE THE INHABITANTS OF CALIFORNIA FROM FLOOD AND DROUGHT HAVE CONTROLLED THE FLOW OF WATER IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE INTERCONNECTED ARRAY OF RESERVOIRS DAMS POWER STATIONS PUMPING STATIONS DITCHES AND CANALS TO IRRIGATE THE CENTRAL VALLEY AND TO SEND WATER OVER THE TEHACHAPI MOUNTAINS TO THE METROPOLITAN WATER DISTRICT IN THE SOUTH CREATING THE LARGEST IRRIGATION SYSTEM IN HISTORY GENERATING AN EIGHT BILLION DOLLAR INDUSTRY THAT SUPPLIES FOOD AND FIBER TO THE STATE THE NATION AND THE WORLD

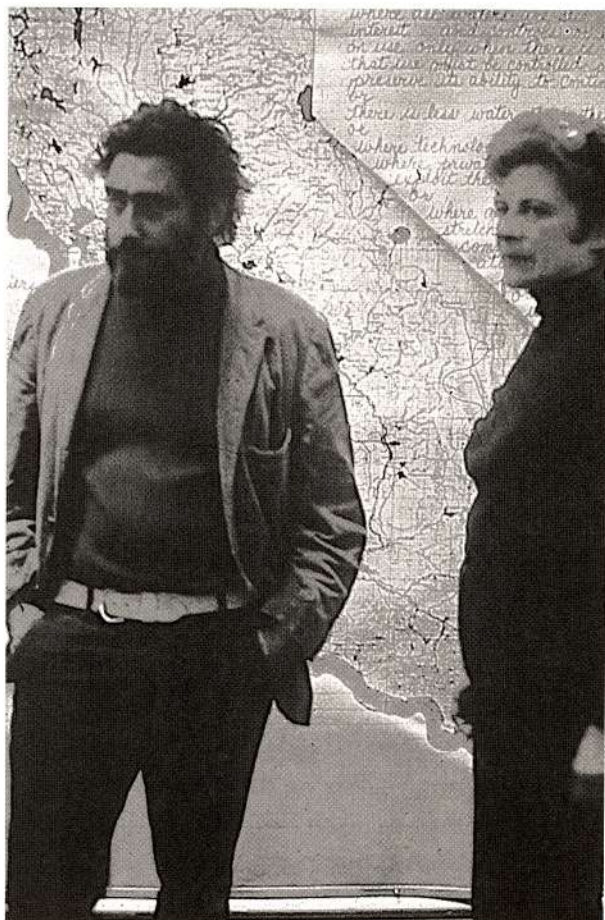
AN IMPROVABLE PROFITABLE EXPANDABLE SYSTEM

"TECHNOCRATIC" PLANNERS SUBSIDIZED BY THE TAXPAYERS OF THE NATION AND IN HIDDEN INTEREST GIFTS BY THE STATE AT THE EXPENSE OF NONIRRIGATED FARMING ELSEWHERE PRIMARILY FOR THE PROFIT OF A FEW LARGE LANDHOLDERS AND AGRIBUSINESS HAVE TURNED THE ENTIRE WATERSHED OF THE CENTRAL VALLEY INTO ONE LARGE IRRIGATION SYSTEM SERVING OVER SIX AND ONE HALF MILLION ACRES COMPOSED OF DAMS THAT BECOME USELESS THROUGH SILTING A PUMPING SYSTEM THAT

WILL USE MORE ENERGY THAN IT CREATES AND A DIKING  
SYSTEM THAT REQUIRES ONGOING REPAIR THAT IN CON-  
CERT REDUCE THE QUALITY AND LONG TERM PRODUC-  
TIVITY OF BOTH THE LAND AND THE WATER THROUGH  
PROGRESSIVE SALINIZATION

AN ENERGY EXPENSIVE SELF-CANCELING SYSTEM

Noting that the results of such current practices have been salt-contaminated land, the creation of deadly wetlands as pesticides and herbicides flow into the mouth of the reversed river, and several severe droughts brought on by evaporation resulting from wasteful irrigation processes, the Harrisons suggest in the mural text that we must shift from a paradigm of "Exploit and Consume" to the paradigm of



Newton and Helen Harrison pose before a wall of maps inside the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art during a 1979 presentation of *Sacramento Meditations*.



“Appropriation and Beneficial Use.” They argue for the reinstatement of natural ecologies and the detachment of irrigation from processes of flood control.

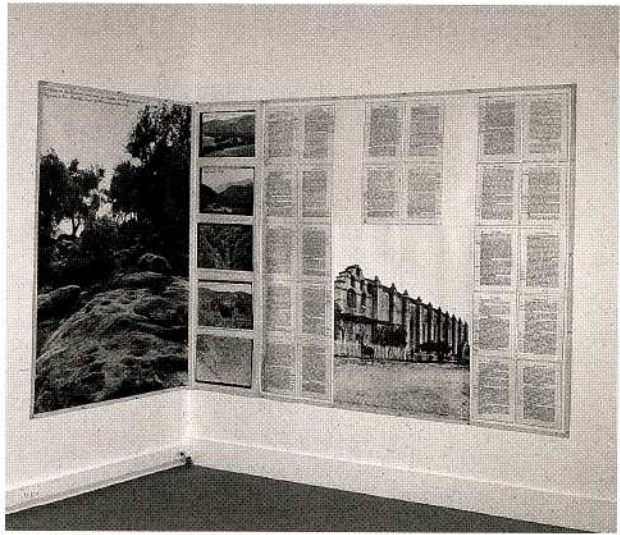
With their exhortations in *Sacramento Meditations* to “pay attention to the cost of belief,” the Harrisons deconstructed conventional planning language in a way that makes its contradictions evident even to the nonspecialist audience. In subsequent work they have continued to position themselves as mediators between the conflicting demands and interests represented by such diverse groups as official planners, the present and future human inhabitants of an ecosystem, and the natural world itself. Likening their process to the flow of a river, they talk about “conversational drift” and suggest that their ultimate goal is to “change the conversation.” This figure of speech captures their sense that change on a large scale happens only when the underlying metaphors that shape public belief are subtly altered and internalized.

### **Pasadena Projects: Healing Wounds, Creating Refuges**

The open-ended nature of the Harrisons’ thinking is evident in a series of projects that brought them back to the same ecosystem over a period of years. In the Pasadena projects they investigated the watershed system providing flood control for the entire Los Angeles River basin. The Harrisons’ first exploration of this area, *Gabrielino Meditations* (1975), was an essentially speculative application of the ecologically beneficent practices pursued by the nearly extinct Native Americans who once inhabited the Los Angeles River basin. The Gabrielinos practiced a form of slash-and-burn agriculture that controlled forest growth and replenished the land. The realization that at this site humans once lived in harmony with nature where they now have all but obliterated it remained a potent undercurrent in the Harrisons’ Pasadena projects.

In 1984, they returned to the area at the invitation of a local garden club to give a lecture on their work. They were taken on a tour of the popular recreation area along the lower Arroyo River and were surprised to discover that running through the valley, apparently all but invisible to the local inhabitants, was a concrete channel lined on both sides with barbed wire. To the Harrisons, the straightened,

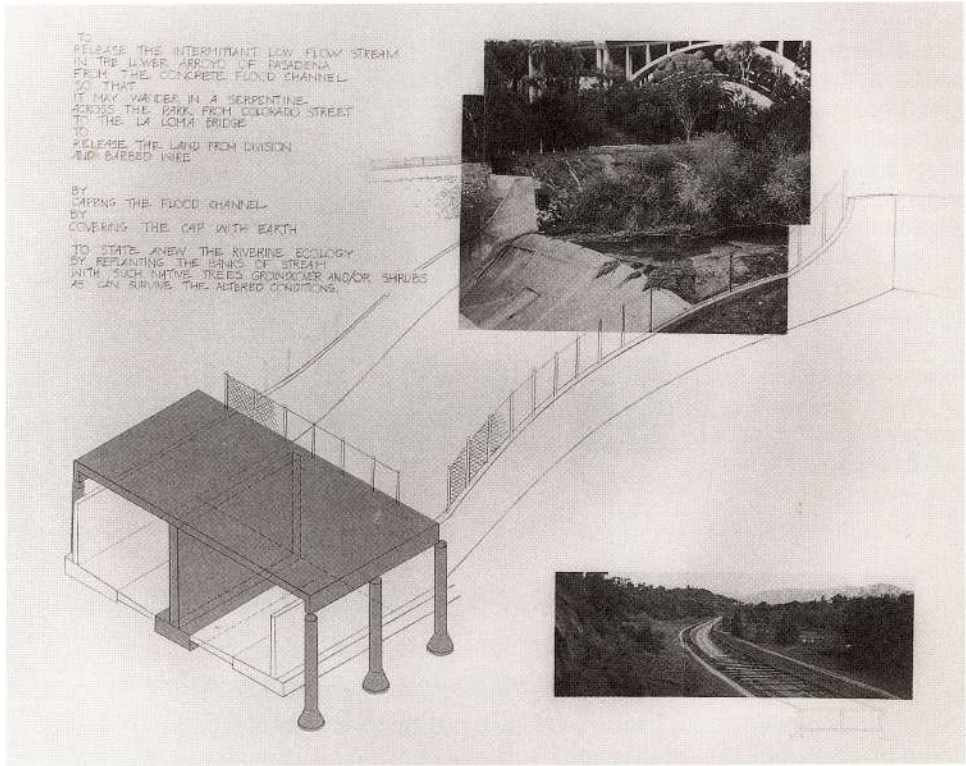
Helen and Newton Harrison, *Gabrielino Meditations*, first presented at the art gallery of Long Beach State University, 1976. The installation combined vintage photographs with excerpts from letters written in 1850 by journalist Hugo Reed and published in the *Los Angeles Star*. This work tells the story of the Gabrielino Indians, who flourished in the Los Angeles River basin before the advent of Spanish missionaries and practiced ecologically sound forms of agriculture.



concrete-lined channel substituting for the original river was a wound in the land.

In *Arroyo Seco Release/A Serpentine for Pasadena*, a work initially presented at the Baxter Art Gallery of the California Institute of Technology in early 1985, the Harrisons presented their plan for healing that wound. Reviewing the history of the Arroyo, they discovered that the once powerful river had been dammed, diverted, and forced into the concrete channels to manage periodic flooding. Changes in flooding patterns had greatly decreased the diversity and abundance of wildlife native to the area. Since a variety of considerations made it impossible to return the river to its original state, they proposed instead that the channel be capped with concrete and covered with topsoil. A serpentine low-flow streambed on the surface would wind through the valley from the Devil's Gate Dam upstream to the Los Angeles River downstream, in the process creating a series of intimate natural spaces. Meanwhile, the resulting overflow at flood time would bring back the original wetlands habitat while leaving the now hidden channel functional and unobstructed.

The text accompanying the maps and photographs in this work presents a basic principle:



Helen and Newton Harrison, *Arroyo Seco Release/A Serpentine for Pasadena*, 1985. This excerpt details the Harrisons' plan to cap the existing flood channel and rebuild a viable ecological system across its top.

Let a grand restitution take place  
Let the process of flood control  
Be separated from the destruction of rivers

The Harrisons' concluding text expresses a hope that their suggestions might serve as a model for future planning in the entire area:

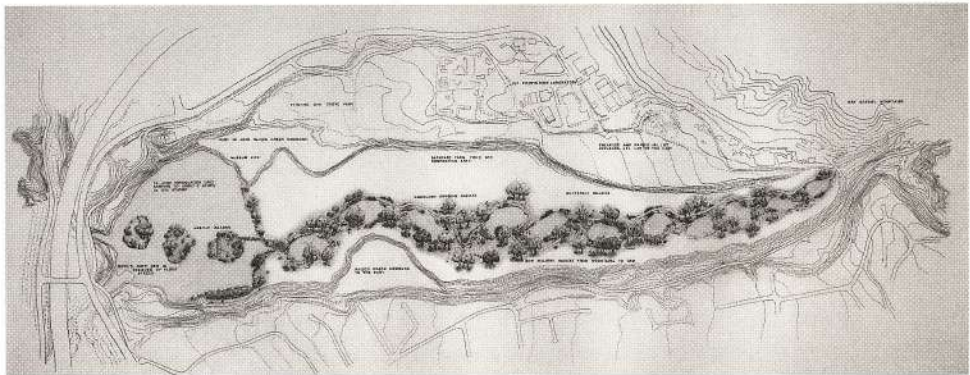
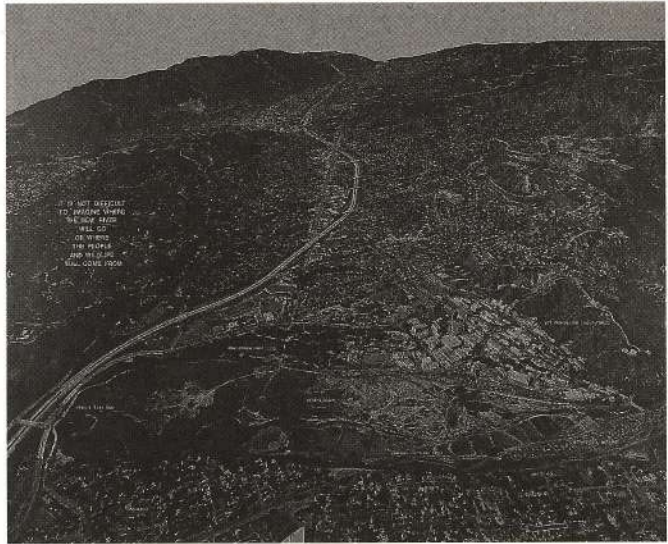
If you stand on the Colorado Street Bridge  
You can image this restitution of the Arroyo

If you fly high enough  
You can image the same  
For every stream and river in the basin.

Despite the great interest in the project among local officials, the discovery of structural problems in the Devil's Gate Dam at the head of the lower Arroyo River made it impossible to realize. Returning to Pasadena in 1986, the Harrisons turned their focus to the dam and the debris basin stretching from its base to the foot of the Santa Gabriel Mountains, where they discovered a new set of problems. Because the dam was deemed vulnerable to earthquakes, the basin was drained and kept empty of water and had filled with rubble deposited by water cascading down the Santa Gabriel Mountains. This accumulation produced unfortunate aesthetic consequences obvious to all the urbanites who flocked to the lower Arroyo for a glimpse of natural beauty. The ecological impact included the hindrance of water percolation into the underground water basin that served as a water source for nearby communities.

With their first concern being to restore this severely damaged area to some semblance of its natural ecology, the Harrisons focused on both the creation of streams and lagoons and the replanting of native plants, which would attract wildlife while slowing the flow of debris into the basin. Through these measures, they argued, the area could also become more useful to human inhabitants. Earth removed from the debris basin could be used to create new commons and ridges. A new streambed could gradually refill the underground basin. In turn, this streambed would make the widening of channels below the dam unnecessary, avoiding the concomitant environmental damage. A series of trails and parks along the new streambed would enhance the area's recreational value.

An aerial view of Pasadena's Devil's Gate Dam circa 1986 reveals the drained debris basin and rubble pile the Harrisons encountered when invited to develop a watershed restoration plan for the area.



Helen and Newton Harrison, *Devil's Gate: A Refuge for Pasadena*, 1986. "A String of Emeralds" was the Harrisons' metaphor for a chain of interconnecting streams and lagoons they proposed. They argued that this new ecosystem would slow the flow of debris from the Devil's Gate Dam while creating a wildlife refuge and recreation area.

The architectural model for the Harrisons' Devil's Gate project was an important element in the presentation of their ideas to local government and ecological groups.



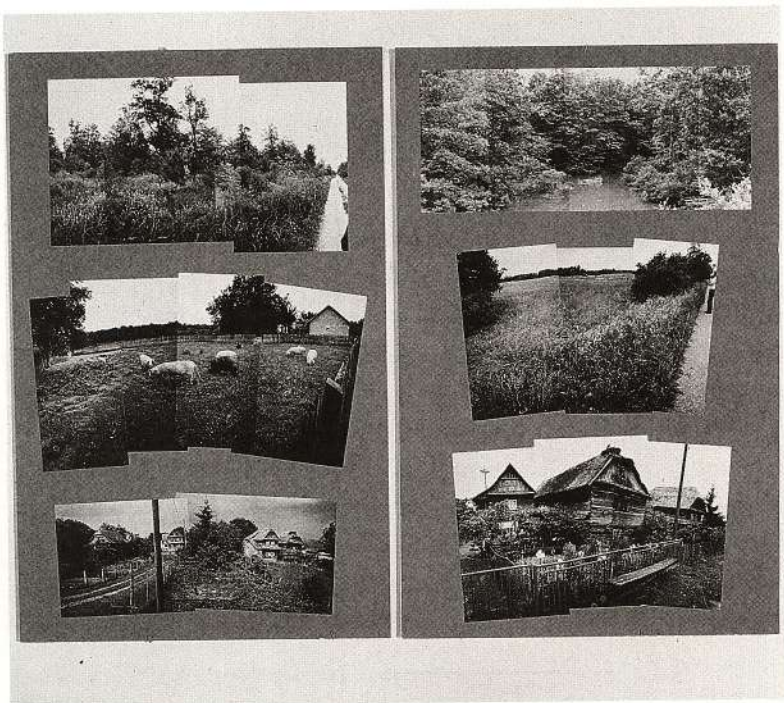
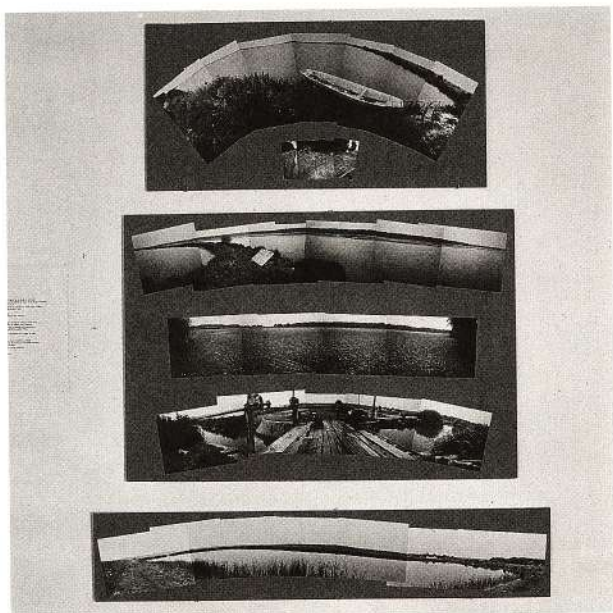
While the Harrisons' introduction to the Los Angeles River basin came from the Garden Club of Pasadena, by the time they began working on Devil's Gate, they had begun to garner considerable support among local government and citizen groups. The city of Pasadena, the Friends of the Arroyo, the Pasadena Men's Committee for the Arts, and the Community Action for the Parks all contributed funding and services toward the completion of the proposal, which was presented at the Pasadena Gallery of Contemporary Arts and the Art Center College of Design. Restoration of Devil's Gate had been named a priority in the city of Pasadena's strategic plan, and many aspects of the Harrisons' plan were subsequently adopted by the city of Pasadena. The Harrisons were invited to speak at the opening ceremonies for the Hahamungana Watershed Park, which, in a satisfying circularity, was renamed in honor of the original Gabrielino Indians, whom the artists had celebrated in their first Pasadena piece.

### **Sava River: Expanding to a National Scale**

In the 1989 project entitled *Atempause für den Save Fluss* (Breathing Space for the Sava River), the Harrisons again widened the scope of their inquiry. This work takes on the environmental problems that

Helen and Newton Harrison, *Atempause für den Save Fluss* (Breathing Space for the Sava River), 1989. The Harrisons' plan for the Sava River included a proposal to create a nature preserve for migrating waterfowl in an area currently containing large fish ponds.

Noting that runoff from the chemical fertilizers employed in the farms that line the Sava River jeopardizes the watershed, the Harrisons proposed the replacement of current practices by organic farming.



plague the entire length of the Sava River, which runs through the former Yugoslavia. Initiated during the artists' residency in Berlin under the auspices of the D.A.A.D. (German Academic Exchange Program), an artist fellowship and residency program funded by the German government, this work was sparked by conversations with the German botanist Hartmut Ern about the doleful state of the Sava River. The Harrisons discovered that, although the river and its floodplain had been damaged by the practice of industrial farming, a process that leaches toxic fertilizers into the soil and water, the damage was reparable. The environmental burdens of the new intrusions on the river—a paper mill, a coal mine, an atomic energy plant, and a fertilizer factory—had not yet succeeded in polluting the entire river. The Harrisons ascertained that, in fact, only four or five purification systems would be required along the one-hundred-mile length of the river to restore it to a state of reasonable health.

Again, they searched for natural means to restore the river. They proposed, instead of building dams and canals and draining the swamps for flood control, creating a nature corridor to insulate the river from unnecessary contamination. A series of ponds would provide a reedbed purification system that would clean the water in swamps and water reserves. These in turn, the Harrisons claimed, would serve as havens for the wildlife that was rapidly disappearing from the area. They suggested that the industrial farming practice be replaced by organic farming, which would end the discharge of toxic chemicals into the watershed, and that produce yielded by organic farms in the area could be profitably sold by local farmers at the local organic produce market.

The Harrisons' reaction to the atomic energy plant and its impact on the Sava River illuminates the flexibility of their thinking about technology. Strengthened by the Chernobyl debacle, local representatives of the antinuclear movement were calling for dismantling the plant in favor of a series of hydroelectric dams. However, the Harrisons concluded that although the plant was relatively safe, the effects of a series of new dams on the river could be devastating. They proposed that the plant remain and that the warm water created by its cooling process serve as the source for a fish hatchery.



As with all the Harrisons' projects, their work on the Sava comprised two parts. The first involved the actual conversations with the planners, scientists, and ordinary people they encountered during their investigations and the reverberations these conversations set in motion. Prior to the tragic outbreak of hostilities in the former Yugoslavia in 1992, this project had received considerable support from scientific and governmental bodies in the area. The Zoological Society and the Nature Protection Agency had agreed to fight for an enlarged nature reserve, and the Croatian government was considering presenting the plan to the World Bank, which had agreed to fund a river purification program. The second part of the project consisted of the

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visual record that the Harrisons produced in the form of an installation of maps, text, and photographs. First exhibited in the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in Berlin, this work wraps around the gallery walls. Viewers follow the course of the river visually as they read the texts in which the Harrisons meditate upon the specific problems and solutions at various junctures. Perhaps more

than any other narrative by the Harrisons, this project captures the conversational nature of their work. Sections of the text are written as dialogues between the artists and various individuals whom they encountered in their investigations. We hear from a botanist about the dangerous effect that modern flood-control methods were having on the native stork and sea eagle population. They present concerns of a young ornithologist who was also working with the concept of reedbed purification systems. They talk with a landscape architect engaged in mapping the current floodplains of Europe against the vastly more extensive ones that originally existed there.

We become aware of a multiplicity of perspectives and possibilities for this river. In order to emphasize the idea that the future is not fixed, the Harrisons talk about past and future alterations of the river's course and surroundings as forging a series of new histories. They urge a responsibility toward its future history:

There is still time for a new history for the Sava  
which, while corseted within levees  
is not channeled in concrete.

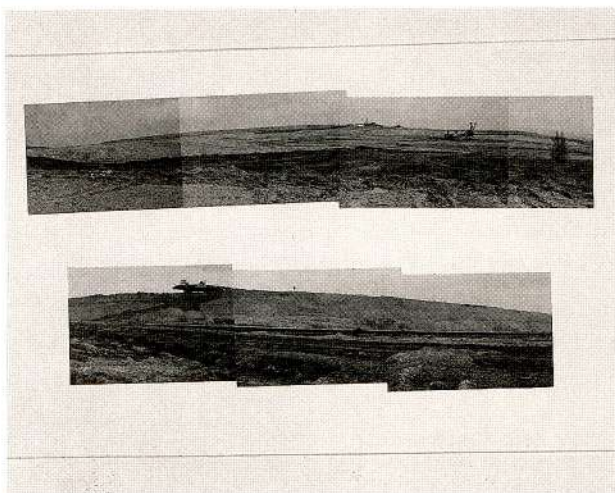
There is still time for a new history for the Sava  
for its alluvial wetlands  
while shrunken  
are larger than any in Western Europe.  
There is still time for a new history of the Sava  
for its dams are modest and covered with growth.  
There is still time for a new history for the Sava  
for its flow is not swallowed or reversed.  
  
There is still time for a new history for the Sava  
which, while polluted, is not poisoned.

### **Bitterfeld: Ecology and Economics**

The full title of this project, *Ruminations of the Closure of the Open Pit Mines at Bitterfeld and the Condition of the Waters, the Earth and the Air* (1994), offers a hint of its scope. Responding to an invitation from the Chamber of Architects of Hessen, Germany, to participate in a seminar held at the Bauhaus in Dessau, the Harrisons found themselves part of a team of architects, landscape architects, and students. The group gathered to consider possible plans for restoration of the nearby Bitterfeld coal mines, essentially a twenty-four-square-kilometer excavation pit and a thirty-six-square-kilometer earth pile resulting from the recent closing of the mines.

The Harrisons quickly found themselves at odds with most of the other participants, who were exploring conventional “art” solutions such as the creation of sound sculptures from abandoned machines, the arrangement of markers to create a line of sight across the landscape, or the creation of a lake within the empty pit. A cursory examination of the surrounding ecosystem informed the Harrisons that forming a lake spelled potential disaster, thanks to the presence of nearby toxic chemical dumps, which contaminated the groundwater that would seep into the pit.

They proposed dealing with the contamination problem first by installing a series of small water-purification systems to extract the toxins so that the purified water could be allowed to rise safely in the proposed lake. Next they turned their attention to a feature of the landscape that had not even been considered a problem by the seminar planners. The air above Bitterfeld was heavily polluted from 150



The practice of strip mining in the former East Germany produced many barren landscapes. At Bitterfeld, the Harrisons formulated a plan to restore a devastated piece of land and sky through purification of polluted groundwater and air.

years of burning coal. The Harrisons suggested that a giant spiral of trees be planted to pull the carbon accumulations from the air while beginning the process of regenerating the surrounding earth.

An important aspect of the Harrisons' proposal was their argument that what made ecological sense was also economical. They noted that in the long term, it made more sense to put money into water purification and recreational development of the area than into accident insurance. They suggested that the skills and techniques developed in restoring the land and air could become very valuable commodities in a future in which environmental cleanup is sure to be a major growth industry. Similarly, if properly managed, the forest planted to purify the air could also serve as the basis for an ongoing timber industry. And finally, the Harrisons encouraged planners to think about costs and benefits as part of a larger economic system, noting in their text: "NOW IT DOES NOT SEEM UNREASONABLE THAT THE CHEMICAL COMPANIES THAT PRODUCED MOST OF THE TOXIC WASTE DUMPS BE HELD IN PART RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS CLEANUP."

As a result of the Harrisons' proposal, which was reported and discussed in the local press, the West German company that was created to deal with the Bitterfeld site dropped its plan for a potentially poisoned lake until the problems of toxic groundwater seepage could be solved. Meanwhile, a prize was awarded to the Harrisons for

their proposal from the local minister of ecology. At this writing, the Harrisons are engaging in further discussions with local officials on the means of implementing their plan.

### **Questioning the Orthodoxies**

Although the Harrisons work with specific sites and particular problems, they also take a long view, using these situations as case studies with which to explore the larger economic, philosophic, and cultural assumptions behind environmental policy. Implicit in each project is a critique of conventional thinking about environmental problems.

For instance, *Sacramento Meditations* challenged the assumption that natural ecosystems can and should be radically altered to serve ever growing populations. One line of graffiti the Harrisons wrote on the sidewalk as part of this piece suggests the absurdity of this kind of thinking: "Somebody's crazy! They're draining swamps and growing rice on the desert." Underlying this work is the unspoken question: Without restraint of population growth, do efforts at restoration and reclamation only delay the inevitable?

In Pasadena, the Harrisons' successive reengagement with the Los Angeles River basin made them aware that environmental problems are rarely self-contained and obedient to the boundaries imposed by local government. Instead, each problem opens up a series of others as one traces it to its original causes. Yet local power struggles and conflicts about jurisdiction may make it difficult to address the larger problems. As a result, most successful reclamation and restoration projects deal with limited land areas, despite the obvious advantages of thinking bigger. In the end, then, the Harrisons' Pasadena projects open up the question of scale: Are land and water restoration possible on a large scale or must they be limited to small, exemplary pieces of the landscape?

The Sava River project was an attempt to answer the first part of this question affirmatively. Here, the Harrisons took on a river that stretched the length of an entire country. That they came as close as they did to affecting national policy on the river is a tribute to the possibilities of large-scale thinking.

Finally, as with many other projects but in a particularly potent way, the Bitterfeld project dealt with questions of the economic

viability of ecological policies. Here the Harrisons presented an economic calculus that makes the case that jobs and environmentalism are not incompatible. A similar thinking underlies their suggestion in the Sava project that the higher prices available for produce from organic farms might offset the loss of productivity when pesticides are abandoned. Such calculations are, of course, highly speculative, and as long as population levels remain high and continue to increase, it will be difficult to be persuasive on this point.

In the end, although the Harrisons point with pride to those situations in which their ideas have been implemented in some form or another, this process of raising questions and challenging assumptions is more central to their work than are any concrete results. Ultimately they are artists, not scientists or administrators, yet this distinction remains one of the most misunderstood aspects of their work.

### **But Is It Art?**

Not content merely to challenge the orthodoxies of environmental thinking, the Harrisons also raise important questions about the nature of art. Critics within the art world frequently object to their work, claiming that it belongs more properly to the realm of science than art. What sort of formal criteria, they ask, can be brought to bear on work whose subject matter involves issues such as groundwater purification and wetlands restoration, with presentations relying heavily on maps, and aerial photographs and drawings that have clearly been selected for their informational rather than aesthetic value? Granted, the Harrisons' ideas about reforestation, floodplain restoration, and habitat generation are useful, but by what stretch can they also be termed "artistic"?

Although it is true that the Harrisons' work does not resemble art in any traditional sense, it employs a multilevel, metaphoric kind of thinking that differs sharply from the more linear and instrumental approach of conventional science and technology. This can be seen not only in the kind of language employed in the Harrisons' written texts but also in the ease with which the artists are able to shift paradigms, moving between the notion, for example, of nature as the figure as well as the ground of human activity or reversing the percep-

tion of flooding as a problem to its being regarded as the potential solution to the creation of a viable local ecology.

As children of the Conceptual art movement of the 1970s, the Harrisons have well understood Conceptualism's lesson that the meaning of an art work is to be found not in the object itself but in the physical and conceptual frame that surrounds it. In its more orthodox commodifying form, Conceptual art involves a critique of the institutions of the art world. It questions commodifying art, the separation of art from life, and the barriers set up between art and audience by museums and galleries. In an analogous way, the Harrisons remove the frame from the environment, critiquing the institutions that have been set up to manage land use and natural resources. As landscape artists of a new kind, they propose that nature is best comprehended not as a collection of landscape features to be memorialized in paint but as a set of interrelationships among the forces of biology, climate, and technology.

But if there are powerful philosophical reasons for insisting on their status as artists rather than ecologists or planners, there are important practical reasons as well. The Harrisons function as outsiders to local politics. They become engaged with a situation or, in their terminology, "enter a conversation," when they are invited by a local arts organization. In almost every case the art world has provided their initial entry into a project, whether by providing funding to support research, as was the case with D.A.A.D. and the Sava River, or by asking the Harrisons to prepare an art project that deals with local ecology, as was the case in Pasadena. Once they have begun thinking about a problem, they contact specialists and local authorities. While they may later work directly with local planning agencies or city officials, their initial plans are drawn up independently of local politics. They may eventually be presented in city hall, which was the case with the Devil's Gate proposal, but they are born from a different milieu.

**As landscape artists of a new kind, they propose that nature is best comprehended as a set of interrelationships among the forces of biology, climate, and technology.**

The maintenance of such freedom from local pressures to, for example, center their plan on a proposed golf course rather than designing a plan directly addressing their interest in responding to the area's crisis ecology, jibes with the Harrisons' overall philosophy. Every aspect of their approach to an environmental "conversation" is designed to circumvent the exclusionary tendencies of contemporary city planning. They refuse to be bound by the rules of any specialized field or the political needs of any special-interest group. As a result, they are able to transcend political boundaries and conceptual divisions that make it impossible to confront the causes of environmental problems.

Equally important to the Harrisons is the issue of access. They object to the complexities of specialized planning language, arguing that its primary purpose is to lock out the nonexpert. This is why they have consciously cultivated an accessible and inviting form of storytelling in the texts that accompany their proposals. It is also the reason that they rely on aerial photographs to explain their proposals rather than the plan and section format of conventional planning—photographs are more accessible to the layperson, and their use allows proposals to be read and understood by the nonspecialist public.

### **Public "Art" Versus "Public" Art**

The thrust and the success of the Harrisons' work cannot be fully understood without a consideration of recent changes in the definition of public art. Having progressed beyond so-called "plop art," a derogatory term for the kind of large and often ungainly outdoor sculptures that adorn too many public plazas and lobbies, to the notion of "site specific" art works that address the physical nature of the space around them, discussions about public art have of late begun to center around a form of social or political site specificity. What links an art work to a place, according to this thinking, is not its physical presence but rather its interaction with the social, political, and economic forces that shape the life of any community.

As a result, works of "public art" in the new sense no longer need to be physical objects that are clearly visible in a public space. The definition has been stretched to include community projects whose public aspect is the artists' interaction with community members;

interventions in the mass media, which may take the form of artist-designed billboards, radio or newspaper spots, or television commercials; or artists' participation in developmental planning boards or public works projects.

This shift in the definition of public art clearly embraces the approach the Harrisons have evolved over the last twenty years. Although the physical result of their process is often simply an arrangement of text, photographs, and maps that appear in their gallery installations and catalogs, the public aspect of their work has more to do with the way in which they have been able to insert their ideas into policy discussions. Given the inevitable process of negotiation and compromise attending the disposition of any large area of public land, the Harrisons' comprehensive proposals are never likely to be adopted wholesale. They do, however, become part of the planning process to the extent that their assumptions are internalized by decision makers who come to view suggestions stimulated from the Harrisons' work as their own. Thus, in a sense, each project has both a visible and an invisible life as it participates in the ongoing "conversation."

In an article on the Harrisons in *Art Journal*, Craig Adcock cites the often repeated charge that the Harrisons' work hides itself within the cloistered setting of the gallery and museum context. He quotes their reply in this snippet of conversation:

N.H.: The Harrisons would counterargue that the museum is a safe place for a town meeting—

H.H.: —a safe and neutral place—

N.H.: —and that their works in Baltimore, Pasadena, Berlin, and Yugoslavia became forums for storytelling. In those places, the museum setting enabled their projects to move toward realization.<sup>2</sup>

Is that enough? Despite a great deal of lip service to openness and accessibility, the art world has a notoriously poor record when it comes to breaking down the barriers between contemporary art and the non-art-educated audience. The Harrisons have done a remarkable job in getting their message heard by planners, architects, ecologists, and other specialists. One senses that despite their devotion to democratic ideals, it has not been so easy to reach the "ordinary citizen" who does not frequent art galleries.



This is the dilemma that has faced many adherents to the new public art. In their efforts to bridge the gap between art and life, they have begun to argue against the idea of the "public" as the faceless mass of an anonymous citizenry and against the idea that public art is art created for this entity. Rather, they argue, there are many publics, all representing different constellations of needs and desires. Genuine public art, then, becomes art that acknowledges and attempts to mediate between these different agendas. According to this definition, public art is not limited to a particular kind of physical site. Instead, what distinguishes it is a way of thinking about politics, community, and society.

In keeping with this redefinition, the Harrisons suggest that the most important issues surrounding the environmental debate involve the dissemination of power. Their work asks: Who shapes the ecological discourse and why? As spokespersons for future generations as well as for contemporary noncommercial interests, they inject seldom heard voices and seldom discussed considerations into the ecological debate. They address decision makers from a point outside the usual perimeters of environmental discussion. In the process, they provide a model for a "talking cure" that may help us break out of the self-destructive channels of thought that now govern environmental policy planning and point us toward a much more productive relationship between humankind and the environment.