

C O N T E M P O R A R Y
A M E R I C A N
A R T C R I T I C S

Arlene Raven

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Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern

plays and in effective labor and feminist protests, to encourage involvement in her work. Newton and Helen Harrison gather—as the support system necessary to carry out their large-scale projects—such unlikely cooperatives as local governments, industry, and opposing segments of diverse populations. The Harrisons' ecological return, through their work, of natural resources or urban viability to these same groups makes the people who experience their art the constituency sponsoring a project, the participants in the project, the audience, and the custodians—their home territory a kind of live museum and they “curators” of the work—after an on-site undertaking is completed.

Some forms, procedures, artifacts, and postures which we associate more with art history and education—fields which emphasize research and knowledge about art—are often seen in feminist artworks, including historical subject matter, art-historical references, the use of slides and notecards, the making of books, and recitation of little-known facts. *The Birth Project*, for example, is dedicated to educating the public about the birth experience. In every exhibition installation of *The Birth Project*, information about both birth and the process of making the artwork is included within the display.

Mary Beth Edelson uses gas-powered “fire rings” in her rituals and performances. In 1977, she performed with members of the Feminist Studio Workshop at the opening of her exhibition *Your Five Thousand Years Are Up!*, curated by Arlene Raven at the Mandeville Art Gallery of the University of California, San Diego. Edelson has documented her rituals and environments in a number of artist-made books, including her 1980 *Seven Cycles: Public Rituals*.

In *Victim to Victory*, a ritual of exorcism and healing by Cheryl Swannack, Marguerite Elliot, and Anne Phillips, at the Woman's Building, 1975, a circle is cast, a shaman is called, and the hearth is created as the witch's cauldron. Women have used the circle of pagan and wiccan as well as Judeo-Christian traditions (the Christian predominating in visual arts, perhaps because of the interdiction against imagery in Jewish law) to express their reach toward a spiritual vision which integrates meaningful existing practice and imagery with women's need to have a reflection of the

feminine Spirit in contemporary worship and ritual.

usually there used to be a person whose work it was to keep track of the seasons: to cite the cycles in order to secure a celestial continuity. today there is no job classification for what i do.

a ritual to be real has to be really done: actually, physically performed by each participant in a personally relevant way. i serve to set up the situation and provide the props. the rest is left to crowd spontaneity guided by the overwhelming and mutually experienced vibrations of the occasion. the result is an energetically joined conceptual web: a real communications network that connects us all at our cosmic center.

Donna Henes

NOTES FOR A STUDY IN SMALL
SILVER

*is a free-form
collection of writings, memos, images that
may evoke the viewer's own recall, as
memory*

Nightingale—went mad and became “invisible, embarrassing, disturbing, dangerous.” She was locked up, patronized, abused; playing with paper dolls in a hospital room, she was indeed in a tight spot. But this is the very spot where the struggle between the world and the self becomes critical. And if we can survive the tortures suffered by the “other”—be she Marilyn Monroe or Billie Holiday, Billie Jean King or Jane Doe, locked up and peered at for being herself in the extreme—the struggle between the world and the self can be an agent of transcendence. Phyllis Chesler questioned the boundaries and cultural determination of women’s “madness” in her important work *Women and Madness*, and Doris Lessing charted the journey from insanity to psychic power as a female mode of human transformation. In Lessing’s *The Four-Gated City*, Martha Quest stays in the basement with the mad Lynda trying to learn about her own nonordinary reality and her own psychic ability. She sees that the changes we want to occur in the world have to first change internally. When Martha emerges, her psychic journey has become a spiritual quest facilitated by the development of her prophetic powers in the basement. “Madness” can be the cave, the symbolic dark passage, through which we find enlightenment.

Eleanor Antin’s *Studio Life* creates a persona and a history but also a view of reality itself. Eleanora is black, old, grand, famous, unique: She is exactly like and unlike Eleanor. Her ballet shoes hang on the door; she is absent yet present. Our questions of what *is* normal, human or outstanding, illusory or real, are not answered here but opened wide.

Newton and Helen Harrison: The Work Place at Home

*A working place
in the house which
we have altered minimally but
sufficiently for it to be
living room in the normal sense
after nine a.m.
and a workroom
in the normal sense
before nine a.m.*

*You said, if a stranger walked in how
would they know it was not just a living
room with old furniture and a new rug and
two people having coffee.*

I said, because a ritual is in progress.

Helen Mayer Harrison
and Newton Harrison

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison sit facing one another in red chairs by the fire. Their *Work Place* in the Long Beach Museum looks very much like other rooms they have appropriated during their years of making a home together. Partially restored to its original materials and use as a living room in a private home,

employed maps to locate spaces in the city of Los Angeles in which she wanted to make herself at home. The Harrisons' *Wherein the Appetite Is Discovered to Be Endless* warned that we may not be ultimately at home with ownership, as galloping consumption of resources or colonization, because such ownership is incompatible with universal survival.

Helen and Newton Harrison's romance with survival is poetic and transcendental, going beyond the idea of material survival to the timeless regeneration, in cycles, of the world. Their involvement with the element of water provides a key to understanding their vision. In May and July of this year, they exhibited *The Guadalupe Meander, A Refugia for San Jose*, at San Jose State University Art Galleries and San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art. In this project, the Harrisons proposed incorporating the existing Guadalupe River into plans for the downtown area of San Jose. *The Guadalupe Meander* would create what they called a "green spine" for San Jose. "Let the river be continuous, let the river bottom be continuous, let the riverbank be continuous . . .," they wrote.³⁹ Biblical language leads us to the idea that water as it has been created by an ultimate Creator is holy. And the message "Let things be as they are and continuous" puts forth the idea that water may be an agent of timelessness. Lagoons, oceans, and water tanks have all been used in the Harrisons' work. But the river is the oldest and most frequent image for time. Time flows as a river, and the flux of time is marked by the fact that one cannot step into the same river twice—not even once, since humans and rivers are both in constant change. While water creatures can swim upstream, we cannot reverse time or stop change.

As time flows, entropy increases. The Harrisons' wish to reverse entropy in their art pits them against timeflow. Physicists, exploring the idea of time-reversal, envisioned a system in which the past became the future. In such a system, entropy would decrease and regeneration of the kind the Harrisons desire could occur. Unlike the world-revising mirror image common in feminist art, time reversal would not throw us back on ourselves but would place the heritage for which we searched the past into the hereafter. The passion for bodies of water from Sri Lanka to San Francisco Bay is, finally, a desire to transcend death and the material world through mastery of them and compatibility with them. This is metaphysics.

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are
extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in
their place
Is an open field . . .

T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"

Notes

1. *The Architecture of the Poet* includes rooms by Joyce Aiken, Sherry Brody, Bruria, Katherine Clark, Meg Davenport, Roy Dowell, Tom Knechtel, Jan Lester, Robin Mitchell, Victoria Nodiff, Vaughan Rachel, Nancy Youdelman, Faith Wilding, and others.