

# great western salt works

essays on the meaning of Post-Formalist art



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discussion of the adequacy of fallow periods. Evidence indicated that except in highly localized areas there is no degradation of either sort.<sup>8</sup>

Relationships between ritual and regulation of crops, lands, and tribal activities are not precisely understood by the author. However, it is clear that rituals are initiated according to statistically average periods of repetition so that "the ritual cycle may be regarded as a mechanism that, by responding to changes in the relationships between variables in a system, returns these variables to former and more viable levels."<sup>9</sup> Rappaport's model is basically that of a heating thermostat. He sees rituals as a kind of binary regulating device where signals are either go ahead or stop. Decisions to institute certain rituals are the result of tribal discussion and consensus. Given any input of complex quantitative information (e.g., concerning going to war, slaughtering pigs, or opening fields to planting, etc.), ritual for the Tsembaga represents a qualitative simplification of a given situation. In other words, the initiation of a ritual is *reaffirmation* of an archetypal plan; the occurrence of ritual *provides information* as to the feasibility of the next ritual stage. In the absence of any theory that might correlate the syntax of ecological balance with the syntactical nature of ritual, the author simply assumes that the absence of strong secular authority and the power of the sacred to the unsophisticated Tsembaga are enough to insure the observance of ritual.

Binary mechanisms thus make suitable regulators and transducers. But why is it that such mechanisms should be embedded in religious practice? In other words, what advantage does sanctity confer upon transducers and homeostats? . . . Any form of communication that employs symbols can accommodate lies. But a ritual is not only an act of communication; it is also a sacred performance. Although sanctity inheres ultimately in conceptions that are not only assumed by the faithful to be true but whose truth is placed beyond question or criticism, objects and activities associated with these conceptions partake of their sanctity. Since that which is sacred is taken by the faithful to be unquestionably true, sanctified messages are more likely than unsanctified messages to be accepted as true.<sup>10</sup>

Summarizing from Rappaport's theory of ritual among the Tsembaga, it appears likely that in its most essential form ritual parallels and coordinates all the aspects of organic existence including conception, birth, growth, regulation, and death. Consequently the art of historical cultures approximates these cultures's metaphysical life-and-death cycle *in historical time*, while the art of ahistorical cultures tends to reinforce the metabolic routines of day-to-day living. Art-consciousness grows proportionally as a culture becomes aware of its own past; art-consciousness dies as this same culture recognizes the non-unique quality of its past, that is, its inevitable cyclic periodicity.

It is not surprising that a very few artists are beginning to become involved with growth and harvest cycles of nature. Newton Harrison is one of the most intuitive and perceptive artists to move beyond the concerns of recent Ecological Art. His career in this respect is revealing. In the 1950's Harrison began as a sculptor, turned to painting in the 1960's, and by the late sixties moved into Technological Art with a series of glow discharge tubes. These provoked several proposals directed towards creating atmospheric effects at high altitudes. Two years ago Harrison produced a compost-earth pasture for the Boston Museum's "Elements of Art" exhibition and a *Brine Shrimp Farm* for the Los Angeles County Museum's "Art and Technology" project.

The notion of Ecological Art was well established before these projects. What distinguishes Harrison's attempts is a desire to question and record his own interactions and to construct systems involving complex hierarchies of organisms. While Harrison, acting out of the long tradition of gallery art, has made strenuous efforts to place his "Survival Ecosystems" in gallery and museum contexts, he has been forced to rethink the direction and meaning of such large-scale programs. It seems clear that the relationship between a painter or sculptor and his work is fundamentally different from that of an artist making sophisticated ecosystems. The psychological growth of a studio artist rarely depends upon the success or failure of his art. Though according to Harrison, one cannot work successfully with natural systems



without undergoing fundamental personality changes — as slow as these may be. The more a synthesized ecological system depends upon the interaction of its human provider, the more that person must attune himself to its rhythms. Being drawn into an integral, on-going, natural system gradually alters the artist's attitude towards self and the world.

In the fall of 1971, Harrison set up a fish-farm at an American exhibition under the sponsorship of the British Arts Council in London. Fish were grown in tanks for several weeks in preparation for a series of ritual meals. The fish were harvested and prepared for frying and stews. The fact that this was done at a public opening of an art exhibition caused enormous controversy. Harrison was attacked as a publicity-seeking sadist and the Arts Council was accused of wasting public funds. Though obviously, as a few critics insisted, not only does the killing of animal life go on as a daily aspect of modern survival, but Harrison took pains to kill his fish as humanely as possible. The real focus should have been on the fact that humans feeding on lesser-developed life forms remains a fundamental aspect of ritual art. Rather than suppressing the fact in the unconscious mind — as modern mechanized existence allows us to do — the artist wanted to reveal the most critical aspects of the life-chain.

Harrison believes that effective ritual stems from homage to our life-support systems, which in turn give sustenance and coherence to each social group that participates. Ritual behavior attaches itself to specific and visible outputs of the system. This homage becomes ritual as people involve themselves with compulsive regularity, and their behavior assumes the complementary qualities of a natural event. In the artist's eyes, it is this movement towards ornamentation and formalization that makes the whole activity creative and lends the group a sense of oneness, identifying it with a unity greater than itself.

This is true of the simplest task. For instance, there is an enormous difference between "making earth" and simply composting manure to enrich the soil. Harrison associates all of his mixing with an earlier — yet still important — mixing of paint,

clay, and plaster, which he now sees as a surrogate for mixing earth and water. Harrison goes on to state that,

Our most important pre-ritual activities so far are making earth and water, where, in an alchemical fashion we mix sterile and separately hostile elements, where the mixture combines with time and our touch, becoming literally a living element, a medium for growth. Some of this is private and does not bear publicity as yet. For instance, every morning I turn earth for one-half hour. I spend ten minutes of my time with a shovel, ten with a hoe, ten with my hands — and one minute with a hose. Two weeks ago this mixture smelled vile since 30% of it was sewage waste. This morning it smelled neutral — by next week it will smell fresh and go into one of the indoor pastures and I will start the process over again. In the abstract I understand that I make the condition for life and that my activity is homage to that life and feeds back into my body both the food that will come from it and the physical strength that comes from slow rhythmic work. I notice that I breathe in when I pick up a shovel full of earth and breathe out when emptying it. I notice that I make three hoe strokes on inward breathing and three strokes on outward breathing. In the beginning when the mixture smells vile I take very deep breaths, drawing in air slowly, but letting it out quickly. At that point my behaviour is almost gluttonous. I become very possessive, running my hands through the earth to break up small lumps. This behavior seems compulsive to me. Yet it is very necessary that I touch the soil all over, as a form of ornamentation.<sup>11</sup>

Harrison's wife Helen has been an instrumental force in many of these projects. She takes over the planting and nurturing of the pastures. Harrison speaks of watching her wash and inspect every leaf of some plants attacked by cabbage worms. The female-male division of tasks between Helen and Newton seems to be a natural detail of their work together. Each has his strengths. Helen comments, "I talk to plants, tell them what I expect of them and what I will give them — warmth, attention, food, water and companionship. They respond well. It's not that I'm urging or pushing, it's that this behavior is in some deep sense right and usually works. I treat the flowers and plants



2. Newton Harrison, *Lagoon—Simulating Monsoon*, January 1973, La Jolla, California. Photo Philip Steinmetz.





as I would animals or children, the words are there but often the relationship occurs without them."<sup>12</sup>

Lagoon is one of Harrison's more recent projects. This is an indoor micro-system, a tank 8-feet by 10-feet by 3-feet deep containing 1,500 gallons of water. Lagoon is a body of water organized to simulate an estuarial pool on or near the equator. High-intensity lamps run in 12-hour cycles like the sun. The entire bottom forms a gravel filter, and the water temperature varies three degrees day and night. While Pacific Ocean water is used, weekly evaporation and the necessary addition of fresh water sets up a condition in part similar to rain, in part like estuarial flow. Within the animal hierarchy, crabs are the end product of this lagoon. Harrison concedes that if he were creating Lagoon in the Southern California desert, as he eventually hopes to do, he would introduce a natural food-chain to support the crabs. Thus organic life could and would take care of itself. As it is, human energy and processed food complete the ecosystem. Harrison and his wife feed the crabs because their natural foods are not available. Thus the human transaction substitutes and becomes a metaphor for nature.

The feeding procedures simulate conditions, in part, both like estuarial and tidal input. As the crabs are introduced to the tank, their feces activate the bottom filter. They kill, attack, and eat each other until the population is reduced to a reasonable number for the space—about 8-square-feet per crab; in such a way territories are established for each animal. After territories are recognized, cannibalism ceases, pecking orders are arranged, and mating and molting proceed. Harrison and his wife have been particularly successful in getting their crabs to mate and produce larvae. Crabs almost never produce offspring under artificial conditions.

Part of Harrison's time is spent in minutely observing the crabs and mimicking their behavior. This may not be proper zoological procedure, but this little piece of ritual is one of the best ways to learn the crab's habits. At times crabs swim over

one another with no signal of recognition, sometimes they approach each other with claws outstretched and open, circling like wary boxers waiting for an opening. Harrison feels that when he is taking care of the crabs on their terms, he is substituting for nature. Eventually Harrison and his wife want to reintroduce the utilitarian into art at an extremely refined level. And in the process they hope to provide an antidote for the prevailing cynicism of the Art World by making art the non-verbal teaching system it once was.

As social life functions are quantified and mechanized, art is progressively trivialized into the shape of consumer goods. Tentative as it is, Harrison's art poses a most complex but fundamental question: namely, can we really sever ourselves from our food and material resources so that there is no longer a magical interface (ritual-art) between the two? In Harrison's mind, such institutions as the supermarket represent mass cultural defocusing mechanisms, the means of disintegrating the bonds between natural micro-systems and human micro-systems (read home or family unit). And in closing Harrison writes, "It is not the supermarket as a center of trade, which is its legitimate cultural function, that disrupts man's intuitive contact with his biological sources, but the supermarket as a utopian simplifier and developer of artificial needs that eventually erodes our inner sense of discrimination and our ability to relate magically to the environment."<sup>13</sup> During the later phases of historical art, the role of the artist, historian, and critic was to indoctrinate the public into the esthetic mystique, thus facilitating "art appreciation." Presently, in this post-historical period, we can begin by rediscovering art's quintessential roots. By understanding our lives we can begin to restore art to its rightful function.

1. Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *Structural Anthropology*, (translated from the French by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf) New York, London: Basic Books, 1963, pp. 180-181.
2. Neihardt, John G., *Black Elk Speaks*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961, p. 195.
3. See "Objects and Ritual."
4. Douglas, Mary, *Natural Symbols*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1970, p. 19.
5. Margalef, Ramon, *Perspective in Ecological Theory*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 16.