

intimate creativity

partners in love and art

A photograph of a man and a woman standing in front of a modern building and a large, abstract sculpture. The man is on the left, wearing a dark shirt and a belt with a large buckle. The woman is on the right, wearing a dark jacket and has long hair. The background features a multi-story building with many windows and a large, circular sculpture made of concentric rings. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

irving and suzanne sarnoff

Like these groups of activists, some partners in intimate creativity began to use their artistry for the explicit purpose of conveying their social values. Worried about the prospects for human survival, Helen and Newton Harrison teamed up in the late 1960s to document the human impact on the environment. Their art communicates the urgent need for the preservation and regeneration of the planet's delicate ecological systems.

Married in 1953 at an early age, they didn't start their co-career until later in their lives. Still, their work represents a total synthesis of their separate skills and sensibilities. As a member of the art faculty at the University of California at San Diego, Newton was trained as a painter and sculptor. Helen had a separate career in education and sociology before collaborating artistically with him. The couple shared a teaching position for several years before retiring from academic life.

According to Robert Hobbs, the Harrisons combine the goals of cooperation and nurturance with the ecological concept of listening to the needs of the environment:

They have evolved a mythic/poetic/scientific art. . . . [They] ask for a new understanding of the need to collaborate with Nature, and they help to manifest this need directly . . . by collaborating with each other. In this manner the subject matter reinforces the means by which the art is created and both become part of its plea for integration.³¹

Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge, a Canadian couple who lived in New York during the 1960s and 1970s, also experimented with ways to make their art a direct form of social action. Using banners, cartoons, photographs, and posters, they viewed their creations as media for criticizing the existing society and helping to usher in a more just socioeconomic system. On their return to Canada, they worked as a team to involve members of various trade unions in the collective creation of art. Much of what the couple does emphasizes the promotion of greater acceptance and equality for women in the workforce: "They bring to their projects a sensitivity to gender issues that reflects their own experiences and struggles to work together as artists. As such, their external

clear and compassionate manner; and how to consider—without undue defensiveness—what one’s partner is saying.⁷ But to apply these instructions, a couple must spend more time than ever before in face-to-face constructive conversation. Just being willing to devote themselves to enhancing the quality of their communication signals an advance in the relationship. That decision, in and of itself, may account for the proven effectiveness of some of these programs.

Conversation in Artistic Creativity

The term *conversation*—which partners are so fond of using to describe their artistic dialogues—was largely popularized by Helen and Newton Harrison. Since 1970 this couple has relished “their abiding habit of beginning each day with a ritual discussion, and their discourse became the central metaphor in all of their . . . work.”⁸

Their collaboration “encompasses performance, written texts that formalize their dialogues, photography, drawing, mapmaking, installations, and actual modification of the landscapes that are the subject of all their art.”⁹ The scope of this creative work draws upon the skills each one brought to their joint endeavors. As Newton puts it, “In a sense, Helen became an artist and I became a researcher in the process of teaching each other to be the other party.”¹⁰

Helen and Newton conduct a poetic kind of meditation—asking and mulling over questions, taking different roles in their conversation, and playing the devil’s advocate for one another. “But the relationship of Harrison to Harrison is also a concrete comradeship within a marriage that has endured. . . . Domestic, everyday.”¹¹

Seeking to encourage specific environmental improvements through their art, the Harrisons also converse with many people from different professional disciplines and areas of society: scientists, engineers, landscape architects, ecologists, and politicians. “Through their dialogue with one another, and through their discussions with various audiences—in both the art world and the



Helen and Newton Harrison with Installation at Blue Coat Gallery, Liverpool, England, 1998. Photo by Helen Mayer Harrison, Newton Harrison; courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

real world—they often manage, as they say, to ‘change the conversation.’”¹² In 1991 the Harrisons publicly symbolized this approach to ecological problems in an exhibit that they named *Changing the Conversation*. In 1992 they suggested the title “Conversational Drift” for an article in *Art Journal* about their work,

which . . . is meant to reflect both the process of interchange that occurred between [the Harrisons and the author] and also to suggest how their ecologically oriented art functions in general: their work sets up situations both in art galleries and in the halls of government that encourage the conversation to open up, to change, and to drift toward innovative and creative solutions to real-world problems.¹³

The Harrisons aptly summarized the significance of their mode of collaboration: “We’ve empowered *ourselves* through our work. And our greatest concern is establishing models wherein *anybody* can start *anywhere* and radiate out change and transformation by engaging the discourse.”¹⁴

work on their own, the Guerrilla Girls see mixed results: "More women's art has been exhibited, reviewed, and collected than ever before. Dealers, critics, curators, and collectors are fighting their own prejudices and practicing affirmative action for women and artists of color. Everyone except a few misogynist diehards believes there are—and have been—great women artists. Finally, women can benefit from role models and mentors of their own gender." On the other hand: "Women artists still get collected less and shown less. The price of their work is almost never as high as that of white males. Women art teachers rarely get tenure and their salaries are often lower than those of their male counterparts. Museums still don't buy enough art by women, even though it's a bargain!"¹⁸ In one of their poster campaigns, the Guerrilla Girls pointed out that, for the money spent on one painting by Jasper Johns, a collector could have purchased a work of art by every woman included in their recent book on the female contribution to the history of western art.

The present success of heterosexual *couples* in art is attributable not only to feminist consciousness but also to the relational equality these pairs commit themselves to preserve. Rejecting any presumptions of masculine superiority and free of internalized self-deprecation, the female partners affirm the right to equal power in their intimate relationships and professional co-careers. Reciprocally, their male partners accept these affirmations as just and essential to the couple's success in loving and making art.

When Helen and Newton Harrison first started to collaborate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, their division of labor was still based on stereotypical gender roles: "Nurturing, washing, and cooking were allocated to Helen; Newton built and maintained the tank and ecosystems." At that time, "they established the methods and routines possible with collaboration, and . . . experimented with gender-coded, highly determined performances and rituals."¹⁹ Gradually, they began to reject those separate roles in their personal lives.

They also began to depart from the collaborative divisions of labor . . . so that Helen Harrison was no longer the "researcher"

and Newton Harrison the “maker.” The creation of new genderless identities . . . reflected a conscious desire to move away from binary cultural opposites such as male/female, nature/culture, work/leisure, and good/bad. . . . [T]hey did this by eliminating the signs of their identifiable individual personalities in favor of many roles and voices.²⁰

The women in such artistic partnerships are finally receiving as much recognition and credit as the men for the work they create together. Moreover, as the following example suggests, they do not hesitate to defend themselves against even the most genteel show of condescension from their male partners.

Claes Oldenburg tells the story of how Coosje van Bruggen confronted him about the extent of her contribution to a work completed early in the 1980s, before their artistic collaboration was firmly established. *Cross-Section of a Toothbrush with Paste*, he said, “reminded me of Coosje’s body in its combination of angular and soft forms, dressed in the red sweater and blue jeans I had often seen her wear. . . . One evening, struck with how much of her was contained in the sculpture, I offered to ‘dedicate’ the work to her.”²¹

Coosje told him she did not believe in dedications and felt her contribution transcended the role of muse. Oldenburg acknowledged that she was the one “responsible for the idea of the cross-section that gave the work its special identity.” And, overall, it “signified her approach of cutting through a situation to reveal the connections of its parts.”²² Having attained this insight, he suggested an addition to the title: *Portrait of Coosje’s Thinking*. She was pleased; the new title reminded her of Rodin’s *Thinker*—an appropriate association, since she had played an important part in conceptualizing the basic design of the piece.

Harmonizing Goals and Roles

The roles partners play in loving relationships evolve in two basic ways:

“This commitment to a respectful representation of working people is what gives the work a real depth. It also marks the courage of the artists who are prepared to subject their work to close scrutiny by their subjects, in order that it speaks truthfully about those people’s reality.”²⁴

Summing up the overall impact of their work, a Canadian curator and cultural critic writes:

with one foot in the union hall and the other in the art world, Conde and Beveridge counterpose an aggressive corporate takeover of culture with a persuasive reminder of the importance of collectivized resistance and a collaborative cultural practice. . . . Taking the . . . social and economic effects of globalization as their subject, they not only record union history and culture, but become advocates of cultural opposition and consciousness-raising.²⁵

Helen and Newton Harrison are militant artistic critics “of conventional thinking about environmental problems.”²⁶ Their intimate collaboration

began partially in response to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which pointed out that environmental destruction was integrally connected to post-war industrial agricultural practices and consumerism. . . . [T]heir work is often highly conceptual and ideally presents ways to challenge human intervention in the control of existing land and water usage. Many of the ecological projects [they] have worked on are long-term community projects.²⁷

The Harrisons argue that changing the course of waterways to increase farming and allow for urban expansion is devastating not only to the land itself, but also to the people who live on it. “Their ecological projects,” by contrast, “are based on building community partnerships that will sustain the healing of the bioregion even after they are no longer able to participate in the efforts of restoration.” Helen and Newton Harrison were pioneers in proclaiming “the necessity of healing fragile places through collaborative efforts among disciplines. Their

cross-disciplinary work serves as an example for new generations of young artists."²⁸

Their philosophy may seem to be idealistic, but in fact their views are extremely practical: a plea for the intelligent use of natural resources—for people “to begin to encounter the planet Earth in artful ways.”²⁹ The Harrisons

imply that [we] should treat the planet as a sculpture . . . humans are clearly modifying the ecosystem and changing the fragile biosphere. . . . The Earth . . . is already largely, an artificial construct. . . . There are virtually no untouched natural places remaining. . . .

Human beings are the only species that has ever lived with the ability to ask whether or not our practices have good or ill effects. . . . We are the only species that has ever produced art . . . [the only organisms] capable of dealing with our natural environment with anything approaching artfulness. Limited as our control may be at the present, it portends a time when we will either deal with the environment artfully or die.³⁰

Making Art/Making a Living

Regardless of their degree of political activism, all partners in love and art have to earn a livelihood. Naturally, they would hate to see their creative efforts ignored by the outside world. They are very interested in having their work appreciated and financially supported. When they turn their attention from producing art to obtaining professional recognition and funding for it, they have no choice but to confront the competitiveness and inequality of the socioeconomic system head-on.

To achieve these *extrinsic* goals, partners have to participate in the game society has laid down for success in any career. Paradoxically, while maintaining their cooperative and egalitarian relationship, the pair must assume a competitive stance with regard to advancing the success of their own co-career over the careers of all the other artists striving to further identical ambitions.

As in other professions, successful competition in the art