

# LIKE *a* FILM

*ideological fantasy on  
screen, camera and canvas*

TIMOTHY MURRAY

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## ALLEGORIZING 'CONTENT'

### Metaphysical contradictions in the Harrisons' *Lagoon Cycle*

A work of art can become an *element* of the *ideological*, i.e. it can be inserted into the system of relations which constitute the ideological, which reflects in an imaginary relationship the relations that 'men' (i.e. the members of social classes, in our class societies) maintain with the structural relations which constitute their 'conditions of existence'. Perhaps one might even suggest the following proposition, that as the specific function of the work of art is to make *visible* (*donner à voir*), by establishing a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology (of any one of its forms), the work of art *cannot fail to exercise* a directly ideological effect, that it therefore maintains far closer relations with ideology than any other *object*, and that it is impossible to think the work of art, in its specifically aesthetic existence, without taking into account the privileged relation between it and ideology, i.e. *its direct and inevitable ideological effect*.

(Louis Althusser)

What I believe to be extremely important is not so much the way the artist has reacted to his social position, but the manner in which he has reacted to the situation capitalism has created as far as his activity goes: instead of continuing to produce unifying, reconciling forms, his activity has become a deconstructing one which is necessarily critical. And I would be tempted to say, in spite of my interest in politics, that the best, the most radical critical activity bears on the formal, the most directly plastic aspect of painting, photography or the film, and not so much on the *signified*, be it social or anything else, of the object it is concerned with . . . . And this deconstructing activity is a truly radical critical activity for it does not deal with the *signifieds* of things, but with their plastic organization, their signifying organization. It shows that the problem is not so much that of knowing what a given discourse says, but rather how it is disposed.

(Jean-François Lyotard)

To Louis Althusser and Jean-François Lyotard, art plays an implicit role in the exploration and representation of ideology and its signifying effects. The art object helps to make visible the formal structures and relations regulating the ideological fantasies shaping the social conditions of existence. Especially crucial is the contribution of artistic

representation to personal and social incorporations of the visual structures of the cultural mechanisms of force and power that shape everyday experiences and institutional forms. These agents of force rely, of course, on simple representational and rhetorical codes and systems for their functioning, control, and profit. In displaying such 'conditions of existence', the art object reflects our dependence on them while describing and prescribing its own privileged relation to the world of aesthetics and pleasure on the one hand, commodification, appropriation, and capitalization on the other.<sup>1</sup> It shows that the political thrust of art may be 'not so much that of knowing what a given discourse says, but rather how it is disposed'.

Critics of contemporary art might be struck by the potential usefulness of these composite remarks by Althusser and Lyotard on the intrinsic ideological nature of the art object. They could serve, for example, as a helpful foil for demystifying the critical stress on the 'content' of contemporary American art. Imagine, for example, the ideological effect of juxtaposing these statements with the conceptual 'Introduction' to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's tenth anniversary show *Content: A Contemporary Focus 1974-1984*:

The decade 1974-1984 has also witnessed a critical juncture in twentieth-century art, identified with a climate of new ideas about art and its place in human culture. The central artistic concerns have shifted from issues of form - how an object is made and perceived, or what defines its style - to those of content - considerations of why art is made and experienced, and what a work of art means or signifies beyond the experience of its formal and stylistic ingredients. Metaphysical ideas, social commentary, and use of allusion and metaphor - elements that many artists and critics had considered inappropriate to art only ten years ago - are now essential to the creation and understanding of much contemporary art. Content, in a word, has emerged as a central issue of the international avant-garde.

(Fox, McClintoc, and Rosenzweig 1984: Introduction)

If positioned alongside this praise of the international avant-garde for returning art to the praxis of social life, the epigraphs by Lyotard and Althusser on ideological form might complement the focus on content evident in the art and criticism of the past (two) decades. For these epigraphs caution against any tendency to dismiss formalist and structuralist concerns for having little or no ideological effect. They compel theoreticians of contemporary art to remember what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the reciprocal action' of form and content underlying not merely art but also existence (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 148). If reread in this dialogical context, the composite message of these epigraphs would be a



warning to contemporary critics not to remain too self-confident in their appropriation of 'content' as the panacea, the *pharmakon*, of an earlier art movement stalemated by the formalist residues of modernism.<sup>2</sup> Finally, and most importantly, it would point to recent texts investigating the ideology of avant-gardism itself in terms of both its form *and* its content: an ideology lending itself to the forward drive of progress and teleology, the narcissistic subjectivity of modernism and phallogocentrism, the exploration and exploitation of capitalism, and the elitism of an *esprit de corps* having found a new fountain of youth.<sup>3</sup> To cite the perils of such fast-moving elitism, one need only mention Hirshhorn's uncritical praise of the return of a mixture of social commentary, metaphor, and metaphysics.

By no means do I wish to suggest, however, that such a mixture failed to surface in the Hirshhorn show. For it was almost inevitable that some of the show's most socially concerned artists undercut ideologically sensitive work with self-conscious references to the humanist notions of metaphysics and metaphor that have given shape to the form and content of the phallogocentric tradition. This paradox is especially prominent in the work of two artists included in the Hirshhorn survey of *Content*: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. This artist couple has been collaborating for two decades in the construction of mixed-media commentaries on the natural and urban environment. In undertaking an analysis of their most impressive project, *The Lagoon Cycle*, I hope to foreground the ideological paradox of their reliance on the formal and referential codes of the metaphysical tradition for avant-gardist purposes. Or put in the terms of 'ideological fantasy', I wish to discuss how they allow the more metaphysical aspects of avant-garde form to act on behalf of their critique of commodity culture.

*The Lagoon Cycle*, which opened at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, in 1985, and was subsequently exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986, documents, represents, critiques, and moves beyond the artists' twelve-year-long socio-ecological experimentation with a Sri Lankan crab, *Scylla serrata*. The artists initially became interested in this crab as a potential international food source capable of being nourished and observed under museum conditions. *The Lagoon Cycle* plots through picture and narrative, form and content, the Harrisons' lengthy, artistic journey. The exhibition of eighty wall-sized, mixed-media panels moves chronologically through the artists' encounters with crab life and its many natural and human parasites. The narrative begins with the artists' trip to Sri Lanka in quest of the crab symbolic of its native culture. The next sequence documents their subsequent scientific experimentation with the somewhat unpredictable crab which they raised in tanks located in their San Diego studio. The narrative then depicts their technocratic experience with the

award of a Sea Grant (the Harrisons are the only artists to receive this funding reserved for established scientists). An elegant photomontage of their simulated lagoon in a capitalist's backyard vividly contrasts adjacent, comic reports in text and image of the Harrisons' difficult exchanges with experts who sought scientific information from the artists. The Harrisons reflect on the surprise, seduction, disappointment, and humor evoked by their rather unexpected acquisition of expertise. The viewer is then presented with a sequence of serious, yet arrogant, proposals, from plans for massive installations of estuarial lagoons on the shores of the poisoned Salton Sea of California to a proposal to flush clean the Salton Sea with salt water transported in canals from the Pacific Ocean. The artistic document concludes with troubling reflections on ecological and ideological responsibility. Its final panels present an apocalyptic dream of the result of mankind's continual displacement of fragile aqua-systems from one poisoned environment to another: great ocean floods catalyzed by the acidic meltdown of the Arctic zone.

This massive installation, hung in seven different spaces especially designed to stimulate 'lagoons', asks its viewer through description and prescription to acknowledge how art and politics always share the site of cultural and representational struggle. As expressed on a panel from the First Lagoon:

A culture is a cooperative adventure a complex system of shared interrelated beliefs about the nature of reality and causation of values codes of conduct and ethics by which people define themselves collectively and niche themselves individually It is a fragile form not having the duration of oceans or lands with which it is in discourse and upon which it depends for its survival Its constancy is reproduction and change Its stability is always at risk.

(Harrisons 1985: 37)<sup>4</sup>

*The Lagoon Cycle* plays out the perils of culture by displaying fragile ecological and ethical systems through artistic forms that constantly shift in style, format, aim, and reception. It is the cooperative adventure of the artists, artifacts, and spectators in presenting, performing, and acknowledging the impact of formalist codes on cultural content that lends to *The Lagoon Cycle* an amoebic life of its own. As such, this aesthetic production reinscribes the activities of creation and perception into the ideological dynamics of art, its structure and content: 'We cannot represent this system without representing ourselves' (*ibid.*: 44). Even when acknowledging its own occasional formalism and frequent narcissism, this unusual exhibition nurtures the viewers' experience of the artistic surrounds of ideological fantasy. The Harrisons' experimental installation marks, italicizes, frames, and presents with



particular rhetorical force the system of art as a psychopolitical, signifying organization.

### POLITICIZED FORMS

For us it was a moment  
 We didn't know it had begun until we  
 were already in the middle  
 Then we looked forward and knew how it  
 should end  
 but we didn't know how to get there  
 You could as well say that knowing the ending  
 we worked backward to what we must have been  
 to begin it  
 as forward to what we must become to end it.

(Harrisons 1985: 26)

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules . . . Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.

(Lyotard 1984: 81)

*The Lagoon Cycle* opens with a large, handcolored map of the world, framed by the introductory discourse of the Lagoon Maker (Newton Harrison) and the Witness (Helen Mayer Harrison). The viewers *know* themselves to be at the beginning of an artistic cycle designed to mirror the world, of a series of lagoons through which they will move in forward progression. Yet, from the outset, they also find themselves in the unfamiliar time-space of a wonderland, where forward may be backward, where the science of invention lies as much in the realm of dream ('You have entered the space of my dreaming') as it does in the world of art and science. They find themselves, say, much like the reader of *Alice in Wonderland*, in the world of an illustrated book where the pictures are framed by handwritten words or sometimes the words are framed by pictures. Finally, or rather, initially, they *see* the figure of a special, recentered world whose utopic center is San Diego – the home of the artists. This map thus invites the onlookers to traverse the threshold of the First Lagoon at Upouveli, where they join the artist-tourists in grasping for the familiar in the topsy-turvy East/West world of contemporary Sri Lanka.

Representational strategies of appropriating and re-presenting (un)familiar cultural forms and discourse establish the First Lagoon as a mental and stylistic forerunner of the three to follow – the lagoons documenting the



Harrisons' actual experimentation with the crab, the experiments' evolving relation to their artform, and the artform's attentiveness to a greedy public willing to follow the leads of the cycle in hopes of satisfying its befuddled curiosity. After being grounded by the realistic panels of the map and flag of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), the spectators of the First Lagoon confront a dizzying series of contrasting artistic experimentations. At the far end of the Lagoon (figure 7.1), one of the few remnants of natural beauty in the exhibition, a giant, beautifully handcolored photograph of mangroves resplendent in soft hues of green and brown, follows in artistic triumph the many alienating panels preceding it (figure 7.2). These contain collaged groupings of text which are framed by small, black-and-white tourist photos. These collages hang on the wall beneath panels of text that frame two enlarged and contiguous handcolored photographs of a lagoon. The grace and beauty of these colorful testimonies of natural peace and tranquillity hang in sharp contrast to the tiny 'amateur' photos of adjacent collage that seek desperately to differentiate between the culturally familiar and the exotic.

Highlighting the political impact of photography as a form of colonial expropriation and documentation,<sup>5</sup> the assembled, miniaturized photos border long and fragmented written accounts of the artists' experiences and conversations in Sri Lanka. The narrative depicts the artists as voracious, yet guilty, visitors in a land blessed and besieged by its ambivalent expansion of the tourist industry.<sup>6</sup> These fragments also document the colonial and capitalistic incursions that have weakened the fragile Sri Lankan lagoon system. Standing out is a segment of a military text from the library of the Sri Lanka National Heritage Trust. Composed by the artists in uncharacteristic roman lettering, the early nineteenth-century decree from the colonial Commander-in-Chief and Governor of Ceylon orders the military to breach the lagoon system and eliminate its human caretakers:

GENERAL ORDERS:

Commander-in-Chief & Governor of Ceylon  
To Major D. MacDonald Com' ding Officer  
Kandyan Provinces 1817-1820

BROWNRIGG ORDERED MAJOR MACDONALD THAT ALL MEN ABOVE 18 SHOULD BE KILLED. ALL HOUSES PULLED-DOWN AND BURNT. AND ALL TREES BEARING FRUITS OF USE TO HUMAN BEINGS, FELLED. ALL GRAIN SHOULD EITHER BE DESTROYED OR CONFISCATED. IRRIGATION TANKS AND CANALS SHOULD BE BREACHED: ALL CATTLE BELONGING TO THE PEOPLE WHICH WERE IN EXCESS OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE ARMY SHOULD FORTHWITH BE DESTROYED.

(Harrisons 1985: 36)



Figure 7.1 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The First Lagoon: The Lagoon at Upouveli, Panel 6', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)



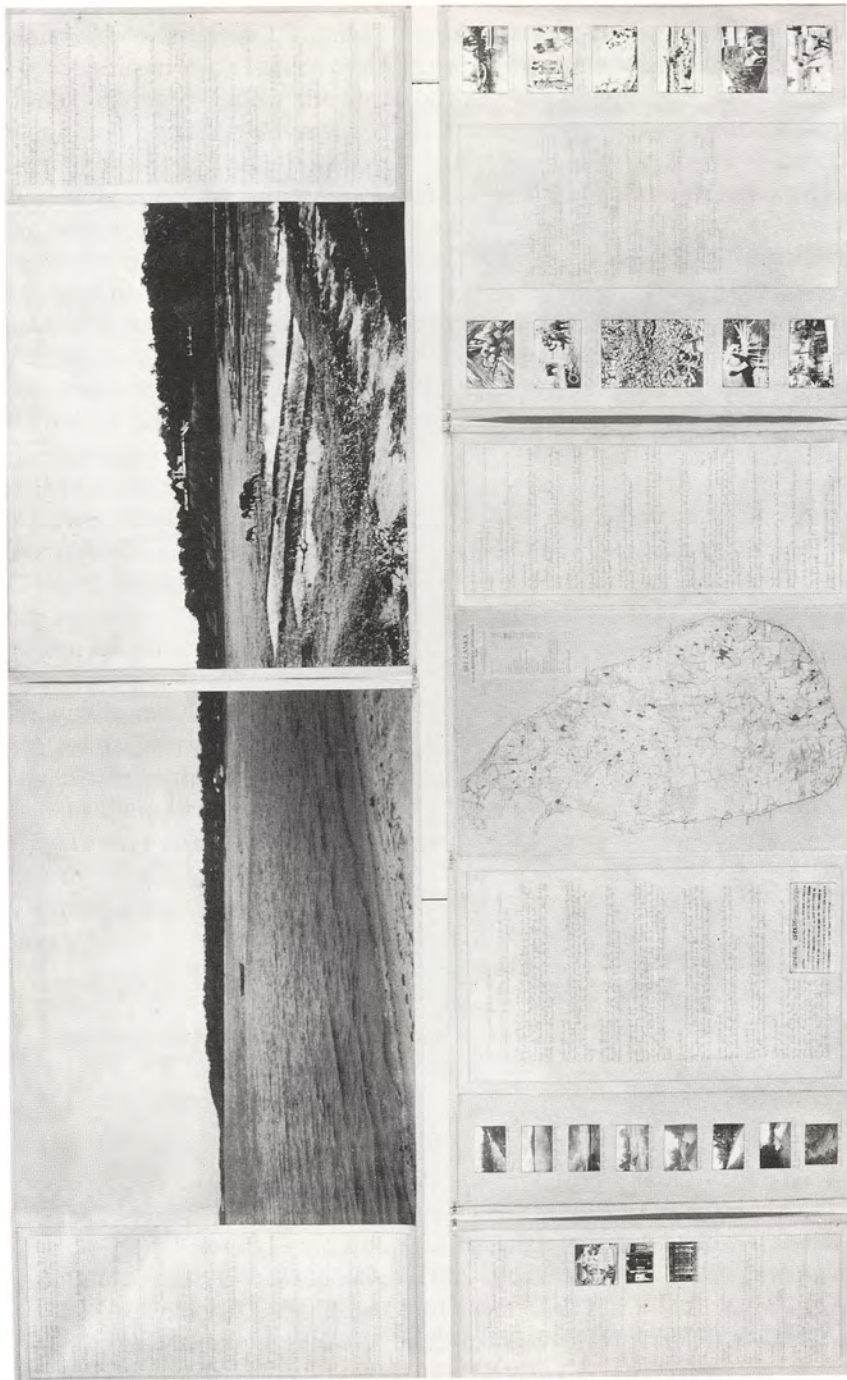


Figure 7.2 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The First Lagoon: The Lagoon at Upouveli, Panel 4', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

Twice duplicated, on an illustration of the Sri Lankan map and on an adjacent panel of text, this fragment looms large over the entire *Lagoon Cycle*. It heralds the general order of the exhibition's critique of ongoing Occidental complicity with and dependence on signifying systems of violence and destruction.

The apocalyptic end of such destruction is the subject of the Seventh (and last) Lagoon. It depicts the Lagoon Maker's dream of Rings of Fire encircling the coastlines of the Pacific Ocean. Figured as nuclearlike, mushroom clouds collaged on to an 8' x 5'8" mixed-media map of the Western hemisphere, the Rings of Fire fantasize the wider scope and dimension of unilateral aggression since the time of Major MacDonald. This is the fantasy of fire fields and rapid destruction which since have been witnessed by the worldwide television viewers of the Gulf War. The viewer of *The Lagoon Cycle* is faced with an earlier prototype of the aerial display that delighted CNN's spectators of Bush's war. This occurs in the Fourth Lagoon, where proposals for a new estuarial system are collaged to the surface of US Geological Survey maps of the Salton Sea. What aligns these survey maps with the signifying systems of the Gulf conflict, and also indirectly with the European history of Sri Lankan colonialization, is their graphic distribution of land into potential staging areas for the theatre of war: the maps earmark a zone of the Salton Sea for an 'aerial mine laying area' and designate the surrounding Chocolate Mountains for an 'aerial gunnery range'. These militarized sites of an otherwise optimistic Fourth Lagoon, 'On mixing, mapping and territory', illustrate the troubling fact that the mere notion of newly charted utopic zones remains juxtaposed with the militaristic aims of mapping *per se*, objectives made evident not only today by the US Geological Survey but throughout history by the exploits of Occidental colonialization.<sup>7</sup>

That these few, poignant examples might also signify the broader terrain of ideological fantasy is suggested by the exhibition's accounts of the Harrisons' initial shock and subsequent voyeuristic interest in a decline in their crabs' cannibalistic methods of domination and sexual expression. Realizing it to be the monsoon season in Sri Lanka, the artists experimented with their materials to devise a simulated monsoon that resulted in an immediate change of the crabs' behavior:

*They began to move around excitedly . . . backing into corners spreading and measuring claws challenging and counterchallenging in groups of two or three After many mock battles the largest male crab ended the dance mounting the backs of the largest female and beginning an elaborate courtship staying on her back and embracing her with her claws even gathering food for her and feeding her . . . The male that had established dominance became known as Top Crab He mated all the*



*females in the tank thereafter for almost two years We noticed that as his dominance clarified cannibalism reduced.*

(Harrisons 1985: 47)

Similar to how the aerial gunnery range serves as a simulated site for 'Top Gun' honors, the artist's simulation of a natural environment of aggression leaves one male in the dominant position of 'Top Crab'. And, conversely, it could be said that the work of the 'Top Crab' is what provides the artists with their subsequent artistic thoughts and production. 'Suppose we adapt ourselves to supply what the crab needs then we become part of the experiment and as we niche ourselves in the system becomes self-nourishing self-cleansing self-adjusting' (Harrisons 1985: 44). In this sense, it is the system sustaining the 'Top Crab' that ends up acting on their behalf. In much the same way, to return to the analogy of the Gulf War, the cinematic fantasy of the 'Top Gun' and his militaristic machineries of simulation are what acted on behalf of the American war enthusiasts caught up in the rhetoric of total domination. Curiously, the economies of 'Top Crab' and 'Top Gun' and their traumatic specters of territorial 'cannibalism' – crab eating weaker crab, superpower eliminating weaker power – all benefit the special interests of Occidental technocratic experimentation. Taken together, these disparate simulations of nature and civilization envelop the facts and realities of global domination in ideological fantasies of visual and physical control. They suggest that the signifying systems and artistic materials of any ecologically based struggle (earth art or petroleum war) will necessarily impinge on – act on behalf of – any subsequent analysis of geographical exploration and political territorialization. These are the simulations, so Žižek might add, of 'fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our "reality" itself: an "illusion" which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel' (Žižek 1989a: 45).

I want to stress that the 'illusion' of ideological fantasy is as much a manifestation of form – aesthetic, behavioral, psychological – as of content – whether 'Top Crab' or 'Top Gun'. Indeed, the most stimulating and most demystifying aspect of the Harrisons' work might be its continual return to visual and verbal explorations of the politics of form in Western culture. The ideological illusions of form become especially pronounced in view of the artists' experiments with artistic ways of making discourse 'visible', of showing the disposition or configuration of a given discourse. This is particularly effective in the artists' reliance on strategies of collage. One result of their shaping of narrative around the visual patterns of collage and photomontage is that the in-directness and spacing of their dialogue call attention to themselves. The mediating

strategies of collage appeal to the spectator's perception of the plastic organization of the artists' discourse.<sup>8</sup>

But exactly to what degree, to what end? In 'Postmodernism and consumer society', Fredric Jameson claims that one characteristic of collage – *pastiche* – stands out as the distinctive feature of artistic postmodernism:

in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.

(Jameson 1988: 18)

While not directly countering Jameson, feminist artists and theoreticians might be more inclined to argue that collage empowers their work, thus countering the failure of hegemonic art (figure 6.4). As Linda Nochlin states the case:

Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Mary Kelly, and many others are again cutting into the fabric of representation by refusing any kind of simple 'mirroring' of female subjects; they turn to collage, photomontage, self-indexical photography, combinations of texts, images, and objects as ways of calling attention to the production of gender itself – its inscription in the unconscious – a social construction rather than a natural phenomenon.

(Nochlin 1988: 29)<sup>9</sup>

In a very similar way, the Harrisons manipulate collage as a strategy of indirect representation and enunciation. While seriously playing out their art's imprisonment in the traumatic kernels of the past, the Harrisons turn much more to parody than to pastiche in their play with collage. At stake in their work is the re-presentation of social production itself and the re-visioning of the analogical function of art.

In fact, *The Lagoon Cycle* dabbles in the deconstruction of so many procedures of representation that this trait, the exhibition's strength, has been said by some viewers to constitute its flaw. In conversations about the show, I have heard many traditional artists, as well as cultural activists suspicious of its theoretical aims, critique *The Lagoon Cycle* for its elitist posturing. It has been said to upstage the audience by arrogantly thinking on the spectator's behalf and by overwhelming the spectator with too vast a mixture of textual and visual experimentation (this might summarize, I should add, the inescapable danger of any large-scale, conceptual art project, not to mention any attempt to theorize it).<sup>10</sup> But



rather than merely dismiss the criticism of *The Lagoon Cycle's* posturing, I would like to dwell on the ideology of its form by pursuing the complex interplay of its 'signifying organizations'. Perhaps an economical approach might be to concentrate on the most prominent of such organizations: metaphysics, metaphor, and social commentary.

### ALLEGORIES OF METAPHOR

To the theorist, a particularly enigmatic feature of *The Lagoon Cycle* might be the Harrisons' frequent description of their work as 'metaphor'. In dialogue with their other urban ecological projects (such as *Hope in Pasadena*, *A Fortress in Atlanta*, and *Second Chance in San Jose*), this exhibition investigates and visualizes systems of resemblance that enact, as Aristotle writes of metaphor, figural and literal transfers from genus to species or from species to genus (Fyfe 1940: 56-67). It is within such a system of resemblance that the spectators of *The Lagoon Cycle* move from lagoon to ocean, from crab tanks in the artists' studio to museum spaces exhibiting the projects and dialogues of the Lagoon Maker and his Witness. As the Lagoon Maker puts it, 'the tank is part of an experiment and the experiment is a metaphor for a lagoon if the metaphor works the experiment will succeed and the crabs will flourish after all this metaphor is only a representation based on observing a crab in a lagoon and listening to stories' (Harrisons 1985: 44). The appeal of this stress on metaphor stems from the artists' sensitivity to the properties of vastly different cultural systems that 'can be isolated and, consequently exchanged and substituted for each other' (de Man 1979: 151-2). It might even be said that the spectator derives aesthetic pleasure from *The Lagoon Cycle* by responding to the call of such systems of resemblance, by receiving from the artist the 'pleasure of knowledge' that metaphorical thought generates. 'Remember', speaks the Lagoon Maker, 'a metaphor can be a powerful instrument if we believe it if we enact it it will develop a life of its own' (Harrisons 1985: 45).<sup>11</sup> The power of *The Lagoon Cycle* as metaphor lies in the return of a life of its own, in the pervasiveness of its theory of value. At its most metaphorical moments, *The Lagoon Cycle* seems to lend itself to an *a priori* condition of possibility, whether that involves the experimental (material) recovery of untainted ecosystems or the aesthetic (metaphysical) retreat from the psychopolitical dangers of capitalistic expansionism.

But just as the exhibition opens on a compromising note, by recentering the universe in San Diego, the Lagoon Maker's macho phantasm of infinitely exchangeable ecosystems grounds itself in the same transcendental aesthetic of metaphor which was subject to acute theoretical critique over the fifteen-year gestation period of *The Lagoon Cycle*. Deconstructive analyses of the fallacy of belief in the transcendental

promise of metaphor dominated the period's theoretical discussions of language and rhetoric. One of the most provocatively precise analyses of the problem was undertaken by Paul de Man:

Metaphor overlooks the fictional, textual element in the nature of the entity it connotes. It assumes a world in which intra- and extra-textual events, literal and figural forms of language, can be distinguished, a world in which the literal and the figural are properties that can be isolated and, consequently, exchanged and substituted for each other. This is an error, although it can be said that no language would be possible without this error.

(de Man 1979: 151-2)

As I have already noted, there is no challenging the Lagoon Maker's penchant for metaphorical substitution. 'Suppose we adapt ourselves to supply what the crab needs then we become part of the experiment and as we niche ourselves in the system becomes self-nourishing self-cleansing self-adjusting then the metaphor for nature becomes more complete and we cannot represent this system without representing ourselves' (Harrisons 1985: 44). Still, the fascinating strategy of *The Lagoon Cycle* is to reveal, to make visible, such commonplaces for what they are. Although the Harrisons prefer to label their work 'metaphor', their visual and verbal narratives tend to undercut the transcendental properties of this form.

One example stands out. Before the Lagoon Maker even has a chance to expound on his scientific ambitions, the First Lagoon closes with the figure of the show's transcendental referent: a blown up cut-out of a crab. This Top Crab resurfaces repeatedly throughout the ensuing panels, often poised outside of the crab tanks, which enclose smaller cartoons of its own literal, 'civilized' representation, or else collaged over literal, textual discussions of its own properties (figure 7.3). But more like the Cheshire Cat of *Alice in Wonderland* than the Top Gun of the aerial show, the oversized and alluring figure of the crab stands forth as an ironic, peripheral observer reminding the spectators that side-vision or another point of view always displaces the primacy of metaphor. Rather than seducing the viewers to forget fiction, this transcendental character reminds them that metaphor occludes its own ideologically coded structures by isolating and substituting intra- and extra-textual events.

It is almost as if the Witness assumes the voice of the smirking crab when she dialogues with the Lagoon Maker: *how serious do you want to become about this lagoon that you're playing with* (Harrisons 1985: 61). The opinionated voice of the Witness surfaces frequently throughout the show as the visible textual figure of differentiation, as the double of the parodic crab who seems to caution us about the serious, figural



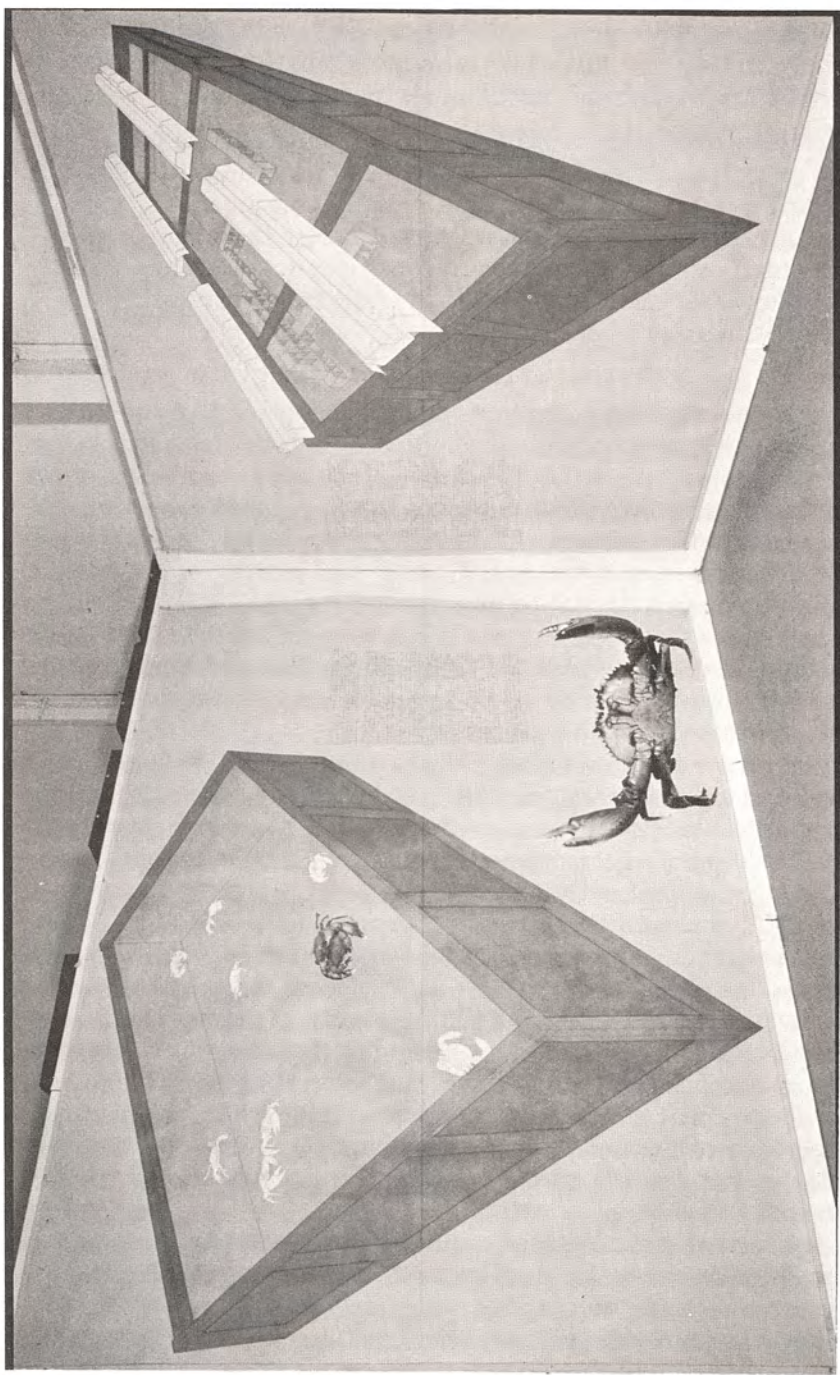


Figure 7.3 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Second Lagoon: Sea Grant, Panels 3 & 4', *The Lagoon Cycle*.  
(Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

implications of accepting the wonderland of metaphor at top value: *If the experiment isolates parts of a real lagoon and places them in a tank then the metaphor also refers to alienation to violation to breaking the integrity of a real system* (Harrisons 1985: 44). Here, as with the show's many demystifications of militaristic violence, the Witness inscribes metaphor within a figural economy of differentiation, alienation, and violation. Through the exhibition's figures and voices of the difference, *The Lagoon Cycle* works as an allegory of the metaphor it pretends to be. As such an allegorical representation of metaphor, the *Cycle* points to the unreliability of the Lagoon Maker's desire to build a self-sufficient, integral system as the aim of metaphor. In short, allegory here flushes out the Lagoon Maker's unfulfilling transcendental impulses. It leads, to cite de Man, 'towards a meaning that diverges from the initial meaning to the point of foreclosing its manifestation' (de Man 1979: 75).<sup>12</sup>

### FROM INDIRECT DISCOURSE TO LINE AND GRID

When read as an allegory of the closure of metaphor, *The Lagoon Cycle* deconstructs many other discursive mixtures of text and image suitable to history's hegemonic Lagoon Makers. In this context, the form of speech dominating the texts of the first half of *The Lagoon Cycle* can be seen to foreground not-so-subtle traces of colonial behavior. Particularly in the First Lagoon's fragmented reports of the artists' conversations with a variety of Sri Lankan interlocutors, but throughout the early part of the *Cycle*, the text relies on forms of *indirect discourse*:

*A friend said*

*Even though our population has doubled in the last years  
we've had twice this many people before in our history  
and no one went hungry*

*A student said*

*Lumbering is destroying the rain forest and ruining the  
ecology Many of our trees are teak and mahogany  
and it seems like we're exporting our forests*

*A hotel guest said proudly*

*Our government is founded on the British model*

*A shopkeeper said*

*When the hotels serve fish and crab no one else can get  
any.*

(Harrisons 1985: 35)

Especially when appearing in repetitive sequences, indirect discourse automatically signals the alienating re-presentation of discourse through narrative reappropriation. Just as these words are inscribed in a visual



collage, their in-directness and their spacing demand that the spectator attend to the method of their assemblage.

On a linguistic level, this strategy of indirect representation has been analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin (Vološinov 1973: 115–40) to be ideologically complex. On one level, Bakhtin suggests that indirect discourse functions like collage: it should signal to the auditor the enunciation of an *Other* subject. Yet, Bakhtin's analysis underscores the allegorical complexity of *The Lagoon Cycle* by suggesting that indirect discourse works on a figural level to assimilate the stylistic and compositional specificity of the Other. Indirect discourse effaces Otherness by associating it with the narrator's particular syntactic, stylistic, and compositional unicity. Displaced by this process is the (im)mediacy of the discourse of the Other, including all emotive and affective elements. In this context, the indirect discourse of *The Lagoon Cycle* might be lamented as a form of enunciation sustaining strategies of cultural appropriation (even the difference in content between the texts of the Lagoon Maker and the Witness can be said to be effaced, in the first half of the *Cycle*, by the constancy of the indirect discourse).

In light of an allegorical reading, however, such in-directness can also be said to reveal and acknowledge the artists' symbolic remove from any possible ethnographic purity. Most significantly, it indicates that the performative – formal and rhetorical – structures of ecological art, like those of cultural and symbolic anthropology, are necessarily figural. Placing into question any metaphysical assumptions about the artistic subject-matter's presence and immediacy, indirect discourse reinscribes ethnographic enterprises in the realm of the fictional.<sup>13</sup> It thus can be understood to make visible the interrelationship of the literal and figural re-presentational forms of language in *The Lagoon Cycle*.

Contributing even further to an understanding of the mixed modes of enunciation in the Harrisons' work, Bakhtin elaborates on indirect discourse by citing an analogical structure in art:

We may call this first direction in which the dynamism of the interorientation between reporting and reported speech moves the *linear style* [*der lineare Stil*] of speech reporting (borrowing the term from Wölfflin's study of art). The basic tendency of the linear style is to construct clear-cut, external contours for reported speech, whose own internal individuality is minimized. Wherever the entire context displays a complete stylistic homogeneity . . . the grammatical and compositional manipulation of reported speech achieves a maximal compactness and plastic relief.

(Vološinov 1973: 120)

When not reading linear narratives framed in indirect discourse, viewers of the first half of *The Lagoon Cycle* witness an art form appearing to valorize maximal compactness and exterior contour. The images of crab

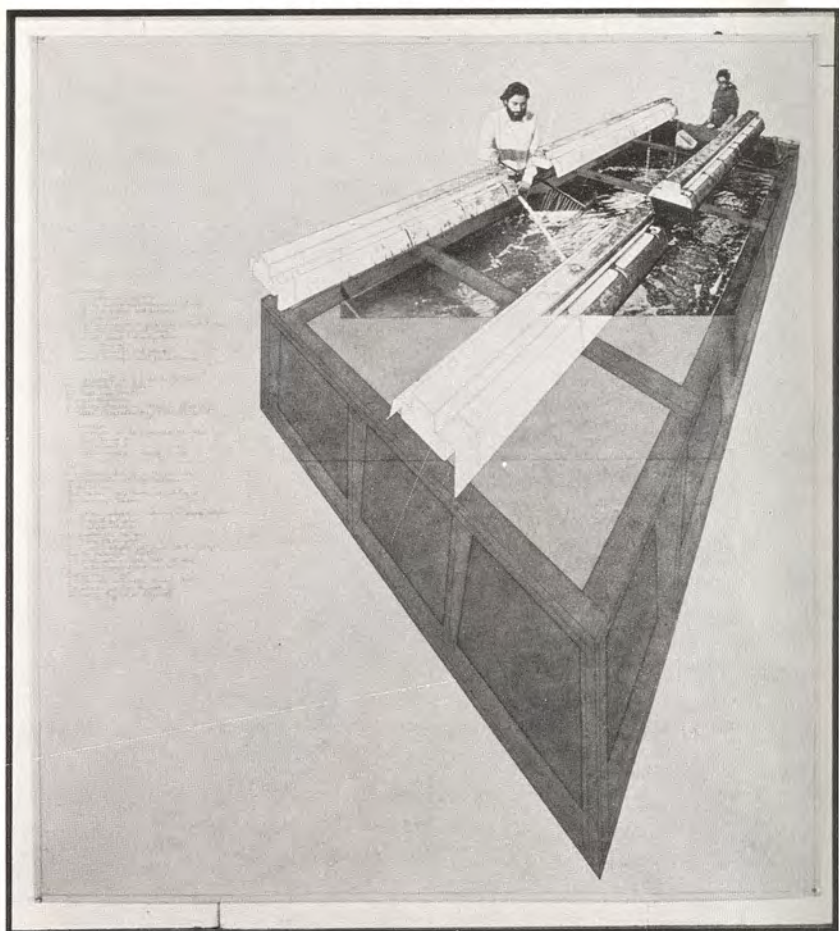
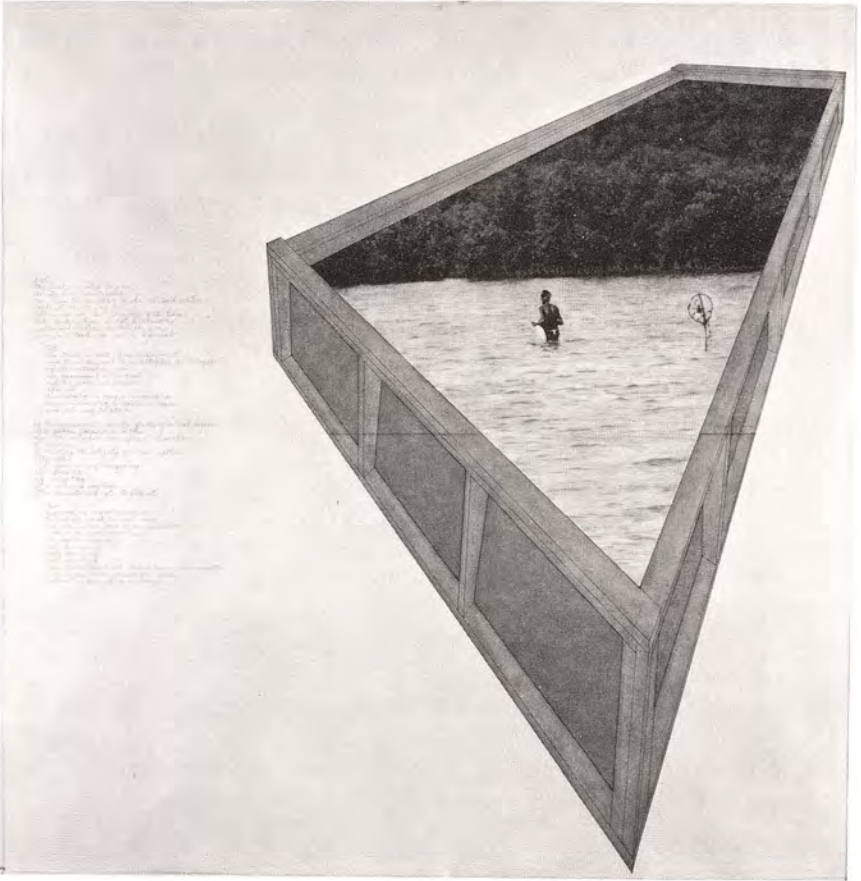


Figure 7.4 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Second Lagoon: Sea Grant, Panel 2', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

tanks in the Second and Third Lagoons are highly graphic, almost designerly, in their combination of collage and drawing. Rendered in two-point perspective, the pleasing graphic plasticity of these tanks gives definition to their exterior form. This graphic clarity of the exterior walls of the tanks lends itself to the expropriational aims of the scientific Lagoon Maker. This is because it tends to minimize the complete contrast in content of the crab tanks in Panel 1 (figure 7.4) and Panel 2 (figure 7.5) of the Second Lagoon. Whereas Panel 2 depicts that artists at work over *their* tank's watery surface, Panel 1 displays a colored photo of a Sri Lankan fisherman in *his* Lagoon. While the contents of these two





*Figure 7.5* Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Second Lagoon: Sea Grant, Panel 1', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

panels juxtapose contrasting organizational systems (Eastern/Western, native/foreign, natural/civilized), their differences are diminished by the spectacular framing techniques common to both panels. Both are dominated by large angular tanks whose graphic clarity defines and contains the contrasting aquatic cultures within. Both panels also portray the artists' labored manipulation of the different watery surfaces. The artists' literal work over the crab tank of Panel 2 contrasts with their figural presence in Panel 1, which features their benevolent gesture of offsetting the Sri Lankan heat with a collaged fan that cools the native fisherman. The combined framework of the artists' exterior (colonial) manipulation of the aquatic system and the visually dominating contours of the tanks

enact what Derrida calls 'the violence of the framing . . . which, by introducing the *bord*, does violence to the inside of the system and twists its proper articulations out of shape' (Derrida 1978b: 69).<sup>14</sup>

As if foreshadowing how sharp exterior line reduces the difference of interior content to the same, the Witness speaks up in Panel 1, *But the tank is not a lagoon nor is it a tidal pond* (Harrisons 1985: 44). However, when the alterable behavior of the crabs forces this same issue in the Second Lagoon's fourth Panel – 'One day we noticed the tanks were very quiet All movement had ceased Search behavior ceased Challenge behavior ceased No crabs were visible' (Harrisons 1985: 48) – both the Witness and the Lagoon Maker invent sameness in the face of difference. 'We thought of tangles of mangrove roots In the absence of mud bottoms or root tangles we began to invent an infinity of hiding places as best we could with cinderblocks from the lumberyard' (Harrisons 1985: 48). While the artists could just have well experimented with tangled forms and obscure shapes to simulate the natural lagoon, they turn, instead, to the linearity and grid of the cinderblock. As a result, the grid system forming and shaping the exterior of the tank now pervades the interior space as well: the shapes and patches of color that Wölfflin attributes to 'painterly style' – the stylistic corollary of mud bottoms and root tangles – give way to outlines, edges, and linear boundaries (Wölfflin 1950: 18–72).<sup>15</sup>

Effectively neutralizing the colors of differentiation, this repetitious dependency on line and grid reaches its peak in the Third Lagoon, in two panels marking the allegorical turning-point of the *Cycle*. Panel 4 portrays a series of three gridded tanks, receding in perspective and appearance from brilliant translucency to shimmering opacity (figure 7.6). The accompanying text explains the purpose of the uniform, interior grids that seem to imprison individual crabs: 'He was from Sea Grant . . . if your crab can grow from an ounce to a pound in nine months in an open-tank environment think how much faster it could grow in a totally closed environment like the lobsters with one square foot per crab The restricted movement will conserve calories while permitting surveillance' (Harrisons 1985: 59). Sea Grant's ultimate solution for production and observation (reminiscent of Bentham's Panopticon) is the reduction of all space and shape to the grid, to the cell, to the fixed object. As if recalling the specter of the historical avant-garde, so taken as it was by the form and visibility of the grid, Panel 4 collapses the spatiality of the natural lagoon on to the bonded surface of a clearly delineated commodity.<sup>16</sup>

Panel 6 responds to this proposal by effacing the forbidding grids of the three tanks (figure 7.7). Instead of witnessing crabs entrapped by line and contour, the spectators stand bedazzled in front of a poignant statement of deferral through difference. The tanks' linear surfaces are replaced by painterly representations of natural brilliance and total



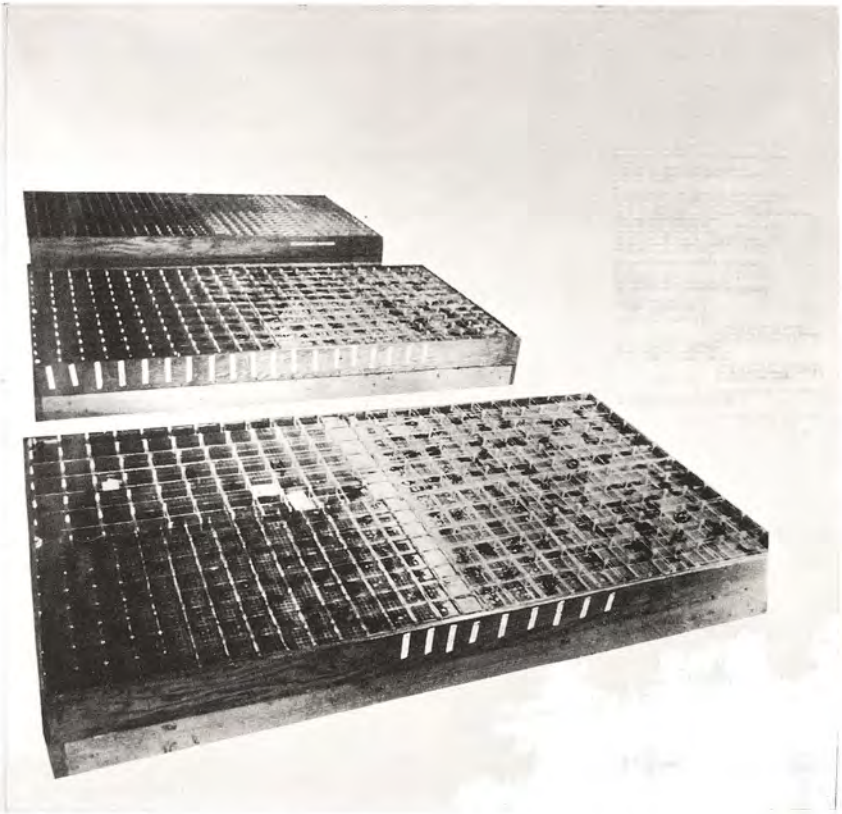


Figure 7.6 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Third Lagoon: The House of Crabs, Panel 4', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

opacity. This is an opacity repeated from the adjacent Panel 5, which re-presents earlier depictions in the First and Second Lagoons of the alluringly mysterious surface of the natural Sri Lankan waters.<sup>17</sup> It is in this panel, moreover, that the Lagoon Maker and the Witness join in mutual acknowledgement of the allegorical complexity of their project:

*Is it worth forgetting what he said*

He is not so wrong to suggest that we work with  
containers and play within boundaries  
but his choices are peculiarly inflexible  
and oddly serious

*And he has frozen his boundaries  
leaving no room for flow or chance  
or even a modest ambiguity*



Figure 7.7 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Third Lagoon: The House of Crabs, Panel 6', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

Now a lagoon is a container with flexible  
boundaries  
wherein all the parts are continually restating  
themselves  
*and continually reestablishing relationships*

(Harrisons 1985: 61)

From this moment on, after both the Witness and the Lagoon Maker openly embrace the fundamental roles that fictionality and modest ambiguities play in their project, the stakes of *The Lagoon Cycle* shift from ethnographic report and scientific experimentation governed by pre-established rules to the artistic re-creation and political formulation of the ideological principals of what *will have been done*.



## IMAGE-ACTION

Perhaps the most remarkable trait of the Fourth through Seventh Lagoons is their allegorical reorientation of the grid system. This occurs through further artistic play with the spatial and figural relations of text and image. Panel 1 of the Fourth Lagoon, 'On mixing, mapping, and territory', initiates the fascinating performance of the panels to follow. The artists reposition the written text so that it no longer stands as either the vertical frame of its accompanying collage or the conventional textual coda of the museum picture. Instead of demarcating the border of the image, the text is written directly over it so as to confuse further the distinction between writing and drawing. While the earlier visions of text establish writing as the frame of the 'visible', as constituting the metaphorical truth of visual experimentation, textuality now shares the status of the 'painterly' image as potentially 'readable', as something which plastic presentation makes both translucent and opaque, both literal and figural. Similarly, the restatement of artistic form as both written text and painterly image displaces the 'visibility' of sharp line and translucent grid with the flexible boundaries of ambiguous systems (reflective of the artists' presentation of writing in their own cursive scrawls instead of the conventional graphic type of the museum).

In many important ways, simple improvisations with discursive presentation signal the transformation of the activity of viewing and reading for both the artists and the spectators of *The Lagoon Cycle*. Especially toward the end of the installation, the viewer experiences physiological weariness and optical difficulty in reading the artists' script, which is inscribed in the Sixth Lagoon very faintly on the brownish surfaces of maps disfigured to highlight the smallest branches of the Colorado River water system. Here the artists' almost obsessional blend of personalized text and miniaturized detail seems to address both the crisis of aquacology and the fragility of their own system of artistic presentation: both are hard to see, both are difficult to decipher, both are tiring to face. But just as they both linger throughout *The Lagoon Cycle* on the same fragile (descriptive) support, they project the same urgent (prescriptive) interpellation:

Pay attention to where the waters are  
willed to flow

*Pay attention to the flow of waters and  
the mixing of salts*

Pay attention to the flow of waters and  
the mixing with the earths

*Attend to the integrity of the discourse  
between earth and water the watershed  
is an outcome*

Pay attention to the discourse between  
 earth water and men interruption  
 is an outcome.

(Harrisons 1985: 82)

Here the artwork insists with acerbic force that the construction of the aquatic commodity is the Thing. Spectators attend to how juxtapositions of aqua text and image determine the ideological fantasies governing artistic action, critical discourse, and their ecological results. And just in case the delivery of this message has remained too subtle, the Sixth Lagoon on 'Metaphor and Discourse' reveals even more openly the inevitable ideological effect of its delicate, sometimes ruptured strategies of presentation:

*Pay attention to the meaning of the nature  
 of such discourse and the nature of the  
 meaning of interruption After all  
 discourse is a fragile transitory form  
 an improvisation of sorts*

And anyone may divert a discourse of any  
 kind into another direction if they do not  
 value its present state

*Pay attention to changes of state.*

(Harrisons 1985: 82)

Ultimately, *The Lagoon Cycle* prescribes attentiveness – attentiveness to the changes of its own discourse. It calls upon the viewer to take on the conceptual interruptions of its own transitory forms.

When *The Lagoon Cycle* does not literally speak of interruption, it depicts it through improvisational forms of shape and sight. In the latter half of the show, the spectators join the artists in re-viewing sequence after sequence of aerial maps whose recurrence alone numbs, perhaps even bores, the viewers ravenous for ocular titillation. The ideological effect of the visual repetition of these latitudinal and longitudinal grids is not, as we might desire, to bolster confidence in the cartographic tradition or to enhance the viewers' belief in metaphysical overview or omniscience. Rather, these lagoons made up only of variations on an aerial theme elicit a realization of the transitory form of vision and cartography. The artists themselves tell how the shape and state of their aerial photos of the dams along the Colorado River motivated them to construct these images in a non-sequential 8' x 4' collage (Panel 3, the Sixth Lagoon) (figure 7.8). Their initial efforts to reassemble the photographs generated unusual perspectives on damming and mapping as well as, in the Harrisons' words, 'a new form of drawing'. The result is the regeneration of frozen movement, from dammed river to ever shifting photo-collage.<sup>18</sup>



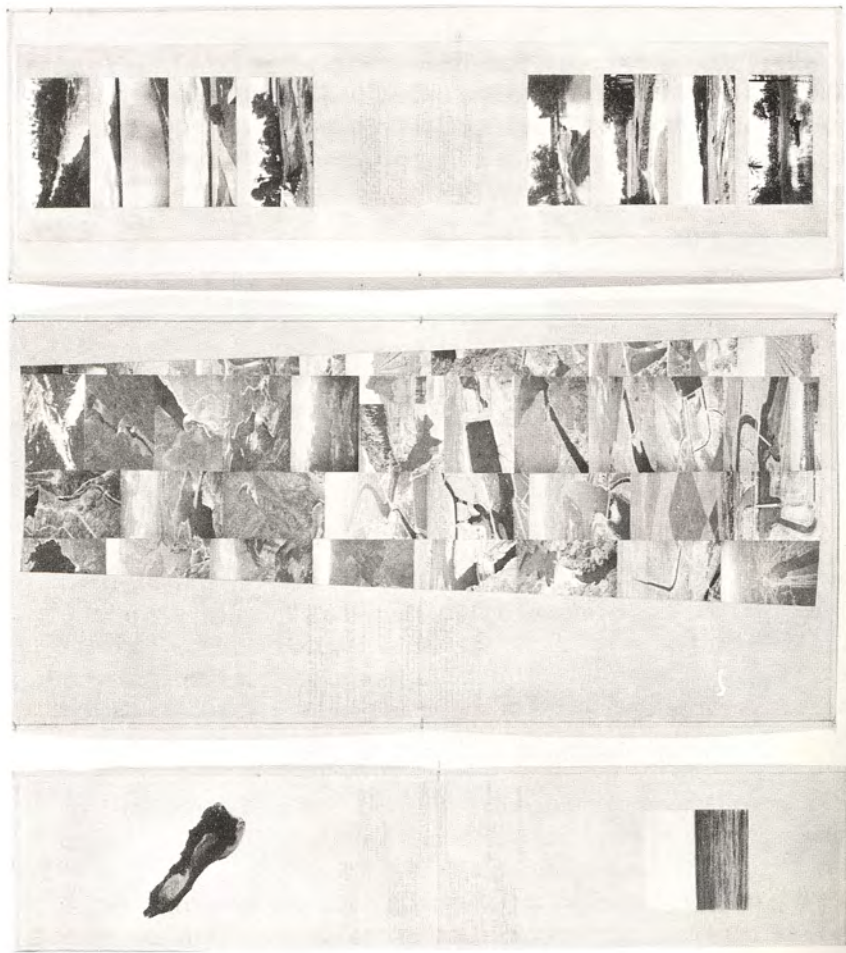


Figure 7.8 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Sixth Lagoon: On Metaphor and Discourse, Panel 3', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)

The broad aesthetic implications of these moving images become particularly evident in view of *The Lagoon Cycle's* kinship with experimental filmic production, reception, and apperception. The *Lagoon* panels take on, in this context, an Other aspect of the pictorial, that of the film and video screen, whose montaged images are brought doubly to life by the sometimes gazing, sometimes reading eyes of the desirous spectator. Calling to mind the many experimentations of contemporary performance with the visual effects of film and video, *The Lagoon Cycle* transforms its spectators into moving eyeballs.<sup>19</sup> Assuming the movements of ocular machines, the viewers shift from deep shot to close-up to take in the different planes of text and image, and often pivot and spin through individual Lagoons in the wake of panels hung out of linear, chronological sequence. The Harrisons themselves have performed *The Lagoon Cycle* by reading aloud fragments of the conversations between the Lagoon Maker and the Witness. In a performance at Cornell's Johnson Museum, the artists skipped over entire segments of the narrative in parodic and impromptu fashion. Especially in performance, the Harrisons highlight the importance of the spectators' bodily motion in becoming the show. Visitors to the installation at Cornell's Johnson Museum could follow a similar aural performance by walking through the exhibit with a cassette recording of the artists' arbitrary choice of readings. Whether live or recorded, the Harrisons establish the convention of asking their spectators to move through the show as if at the controls of a video cassette recorder, sometimes moving ahead in fast forward, sometimes resting on pause, and other times rewinding to do double takes of edited or fragmented sequences. Important to this show, then, is not so much the individual frame as the relation of the single panel to the images in all seven Lagoons, as well as the movement between frames, the interrelation of the panels *and* intervals to one another and their spectators. Through modulations of sight, focus, and perspective, the viewers come to simulate something like a cinematic system of museum representation. Their inconstant spectatorial movements attest, moreover, to the impossible struggle of the signifying system to keep and maintain watch over a performance of changing perspectives and aural tests.<sup>20</sup> Precisely this relation is said by Laclau and Mouffe to lie at the heart of the ideological:

it is not the poverty of signifieds but, on the contrary, polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure. That is what establishes the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of every social identity. Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it.

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 113)

Such an overflow of filmic movement is typical of the *The Lagoon*



*Cycle's* imagery as well as its reception. This becomes most visibly evident when both artists and viewers tilt and shift during an exciting visual succession of text and image in the Fifth Lagoon, the sequence concerning the Lagoon Maker's fantasy of cleansing the Salton Sea (figure 7.9). In manipulating a hand-held photograph of the Salton Sea in order to achieve a better view, the Lagoon Maker suddenly *sees, reads* the image for what it allegorically represents: 'As I tipped the map in another direction looking at the Salton Sea in relationship to Baja and the mainland and the gulf an image emerged of the Salton Sea as a diseased bladder' (Harrisons 1985: 78). Here, movement of mind and body doubles as the object of artistic representation: the flexible act of interpretation generates the tipping of the art object, which is to say that the tipping of the art object generates the flexible act of interpretation. Such an interpretive tip also has its corollary in cinematic movement. For it corresponds to the cinematic motion of 'action-image' analyzed by Gilles Deleuze in his theorization of Bergson:

This is therefore the second avatar of the movement-image: it becomes *action-image*. One passes imperceptibly from perception to action. The operation under consideration is no longer elimination, selection or framing, but the incurving of the universe, which simultaneously causes the virtual action of things on us and our possible action on things.

(Deleuze 1985: 65)

Virtual action as a sort of empowered criticality – something like this is certainly at work in the Harrisons' analogical turning of the Salton Sea into diseased bladder.

In sensitizing its viewers to their own reciprocal responsibilities as filmic producers, *The Lagoon Cycle* taps into the enigmatic relations of formal artistic structure and social content. It graphically reveals the influence of form on social action and policy while reminding its artists and spectators of the uncertain possibilities of their reactions to repressive, metaphysical conventions of form. Regardless of *The Lagoon Cycle's* pervasive narcissism and blatant self-righteousness (a colonial attitude it cannot quite shake), this exhibition provides its viewers with the naked perception of the incomplete material structures on which they have been nurtured and through which they are constituted. By emphasizing the frames of performance always underlying representation, the combined contours and tangles of the show's action-images return artistic practice to the signifying systems of its untraceable limits: the ideological fantasies regulating social reality.

So it goes that the spectator of *The Lagoon Cycle* exits this show mindful of the libidinal resonance of its dreamy content:

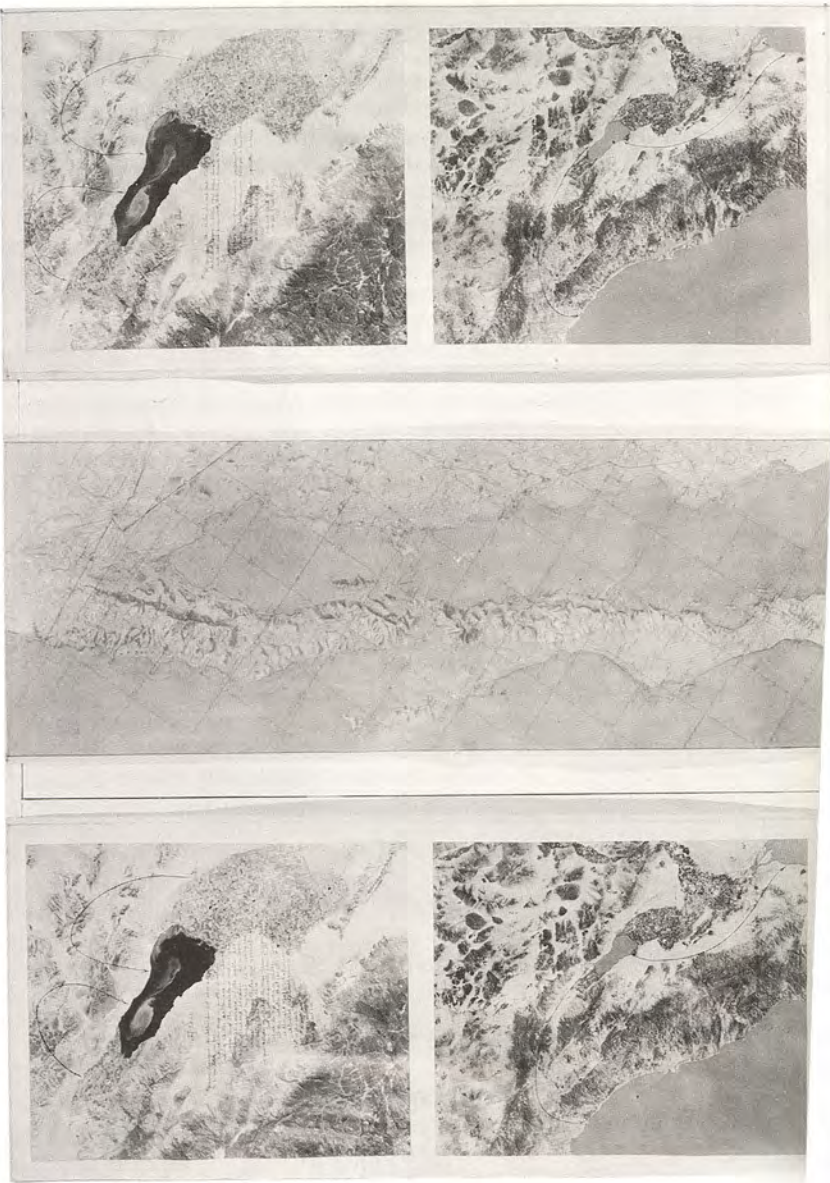


Figure 7.9 Helen Mayer Harrison/Newton Harrison, 'The Fifth Lagoon: From the Salton Sea to the Pacific Ocean/From the Salton Sea to the Gulf, Panel 4', *The Lagoon Cycle*. (Photo: Jon Reis. Courtesy: the artists and Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University)



*Pay attention to the state of belief*  
 Pay attention to the belief stated  
*Pay attention to the flow of belief and the willing of desire*  
 Pay attention to the flow of belief  
 and the enacting of desire  
*Pay attention to the system upon which desire is enacted*  
*and the system that generates desire.*

(Harrisons 1985: 88)

## NOTES

- 1 In embracing Althusser's argument, Thomas E. Lewis cautions against any tendency to privilege aesthetics: 'Marxist theory, therefore, should dispense with distinctions between the "aesthetic effect" and the "ideological effect". Maintaining this distinction fosters a reductive view of ideology and impedes a rigorously historical understanding of the plurality of literary function' (Lewis 1983: 4-16). An uncritical appropriation of Althusser might also diminish understanding of what Foster (1986) and McNamara (1992) discuss as the heterogeneity of art as commodity fetishism.
- 2 Burke (1969, 1973) and Girard (1977) discuss art's curative power as *pharmakon* in the context of their well-known theories of the scapegoat. But in 'Plato's pharmacy', Derrida (1981: 63-171) analyzes the illusory nature of any such cure, entrapped as it is within the larger world picture of an equally illusory metaphysics. Murray (1977) discusses the similar metaphysical entrapment of Burke's fascinating texts.
- 3 See Lyotard (1984a) and 'Answering the question: what is postmodernism?', an appendix printed only in the American edition of *The Postmodern Condition* (1984); Hadjinicolaou (1982); Krauss (1981); Guilbaut (1983); Bürger (1984); Murray (1984b); Mulvey (1989: 11-26); Huyssen (1986: 160-221); Penley (1989: 3-37); Bois (1991); Graver (1992); McNamera (1992).
- 4 The exhibition of *The Lagoon Cycle* was organized by Thomas W. Leavitt and Penny Bealle for the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, March 23 - June 2, 1985. All citations of *The Lagoon Cycle* are from the catalogue, which notes that 'because the Harrisons continually revise the text for performance, the text presented here occasionally differs from the version on the image'; the text of the Lagoon Maker is in roman, that of the Witness is in italics.
- 5 On photography's complicity in the procedures of colonization, see Benjamin (1969: 217-51; 1971); Lyotard (1973); Owens (1983); Burgin (1982); Tagg (1988); Copjec (1989b). That painting can also have a direct political impact as a practice of colonial appropriation is evidenced by the rumor that Sri Lankan activists broke into the Johnson Museum during the exhibition and removed the panel of the Sri Lankan flag, only to abandon it outside while fleeing security forces.
- 6 For theoretical analyses of the ideological complexities of tourism, see MacCannell (1989); Van den Abbeele (1980); Frow (1991).
- 7 Michel de Certeau opens his *Lagoon Cycle* catalogue essay (1985) with interesting reflections on the sociopolitical history of cartography. Lyotard (1979) dwells on similar points in *Le mur de Pacifique*, a critical fiction that resembles *The Lagoon Cycle* in recentering the world in San Diego. Marin (1984) engages