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NURTURING
NATURE:
PENINSULA EUROPE



DAVINA THACKARA

Art projects in Britain which address ecological and environmental issues have rarely been more than an occasional activity and have tended to focus on the small and ephemeral. The biodegradable sculptures of David Nash come to mind or the more transient works of Andy Goldsworthy. More recently, there have been attempts to include artists in local schemes to tackle pollution. But even here the artist's role is usually that of collaborating with scientists to help implement scientific solutions and mediating between environmental authorities and local communities.¹

For artist led work which deals with the environment on a significant scale, one needs to look further afield. For Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, the California based artist team who have been developing environmental projects for some thirty years, their latest initiative concerns the entire continent of Europe. *Peninsula Europe*, a concept which originated in 1994, is nothing less than a proposal for a new ecological and cultural blueprint for the area of land which extends from the North Sea and Atlantic in the North, to the Black Sea and Mediterranean in the East and South, along with many of its peripheral islands.

The proposal itself is now fully developed, available as both a publication in German, and accessible through a dedicated website². The accompanying exhibition of maps, photographs, drawings and texts, planned to tour to major venues in several European countries next year, is still in the production stage. But aside from the website, the British audience is unlikely to see or hear of it. There are no plans as yet to exhibit the work here or to publish an English edition of the book. In view of what they feel was the luke-warm response to an ambitious work they produced two years ago in the Pennines, the Harrisons are not unduly surprised.

Casting a Green Net, Can It Be That We Are Seeing A Dragon? was a multifaceted project which approached the Pennine region as an ecological and cultural entity. It was commissioned by the late Robert Hopper of the Henry Moore Institute and the Tate Gallery, Liverpool as part of the Artranspennine98 event, and was supported by a two year research residency at Manchester Metropolitan University. Among its key proposals were a series of long term measures for reducing dependence on chemical fertilisation of the land, minimising the effects of development, and preserving local farming traditions. Although these ideas were widely discussed at the time

¹ See Elsa Levisseur, *Quaking Houses and Skinninggrove: Collaborative Projects in Art and Science*, Public Art Journal, Vol 1, No. 4, October 2000

² The website can be found at www.peninsula-europe.net

with local professional and community groups and accepted by many as broadly feasible, two years on the Harrisons maintain little has happened. "The project has not been taken up by the relevant authorities" claims Helen Harrison. "It began in the art world and stayed there. And the art world in Britain is an elite that has little interest in ecological issues or environmental politics".³ They believe one of the principal problems was that insufficient steps were taken to enable their ideas to be disseminated beyond the art audience. The large scale drawings, maps and photographs which form the 'icons' and which are a seminal ingredient within the Harrisons' mode of presentation, were only exhibited for more than a day in one venue⁴, no funds were provided for a poster, and the catalogue, which they produced themselves, received minimal distribution.

They contrast this with what they perceive to be the situation in mainland Europe. "People care more genuinely about the land in Europe", argues Helen Harrison. "Attitudes in England are more romantic and the ecological crisis is not fully appreciated. In Europe there is a greater sense of needing to restore the land and conserve it". Equally important from their point of view, they believe "there is less resistance (amongst politicians and other kinds of professionals) in Europe to working with artists".

These views are not necessarily shared by other individuals and organisations involved with the *Dragon* project. David Haley, the co-ordinator of the project and Research and Development Co-ordinator for Water and Well-being at Manchester Metropolitan University, claims that local planning and environmental groups are actively promoting the Harrisons' ideas with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and with the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology. And Professor John Handley of the School of Planning and Landscape at Manchester University and Director of 'Cure', the Centre for Urban and Regional Ecology, confirms that a number of their suggestions are being incorporated into the policies and planning proposals of the Regional Development Agency. Both agree that change is inevitably slow but that the Harrisons have succeeded in highlighting the importance of sustainability and natural diversity to the social and economic regeneration of the region.

In the light of two successful projects undertaken in Europe in the last five years, it is perhaps understandable that the Harrisons should feel frustrated

³ The Harrisons were in Liverpool in September 2000 where they were interviewed for this article.

⁴ *Castling a Green Net. Can It Be That We Are Seeing A Dragon?* formed part of the Artranspennine98 exhibition and was displayed at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool in 1998.

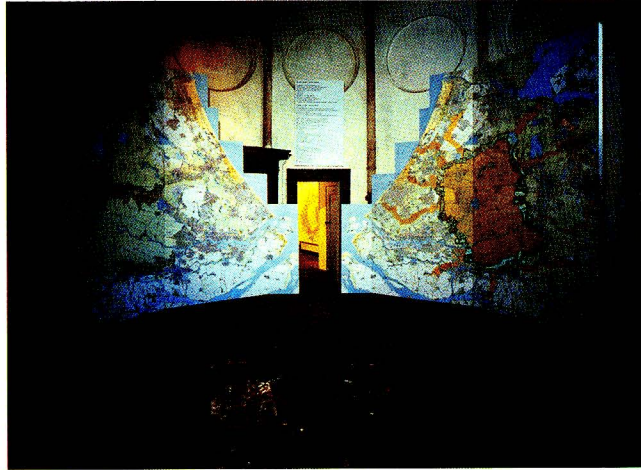
with the bureaucratic pace of the British response and more enthusiastic about promoting their ideas in the European arena.

Grüne Landschaften – Vision Die Welt als Garten, the publication for *Peninsula Europe*, was commissioned in 1998 by Hanover 2000 and the Schweisfurth Foundation in Munich – an organisation which promotes organic farming and other ecological concerns. It was produced by Campus Verlag in Frankfurt in 1999 as part of a series of books examining the role of the land in the continent's future. Despite the uniqueness of many aspects of their approach, the Harrisons' projects are never self initiated and they will only enter into discussions surrounding a particular region when specifically invited to do so by a host organisation. To take part in a constructive discussion about change, the urgency, they say, must already be there, and it is only within this context of an existing or emerging discourse of place that their ideas can find resonance.

Although books have not until now played a central role in their work, language based activity is at the heart of their working method. Once the invitation has been received, each project begins with a thorough investigation of the environment from multiple ecological and social standpoints based on dialogue with many levels of the community. Language, particularly in its narrative form, they see as a critical component within the formation of the cultural and natural landscape. "Every place", they maintain, "is telling the story of its own becoming" and an opportunity to enter into a context is one to influence the direction of that story. Similarly, creative writing plays a vital role, and all projects take the form of a prose poem, often designed to be chanted. Verbal expression is then combined with various forms of visual imagery – the icons – which work together to support layering of meaning and ideas and endow the place with an emblematic shape and structure which becomes critical to any discussion of its future. By relying on the interplay of word and symbol, the harrisons believe they are reviving one of the most ancient of cultural forms with traditions in both Western and Eastern systems of belief. It is a method concerned above all with metaphor as a means of engaging the imagination, and rests upon profound conviction in the empathetic and connective potential of the artistic impulse.

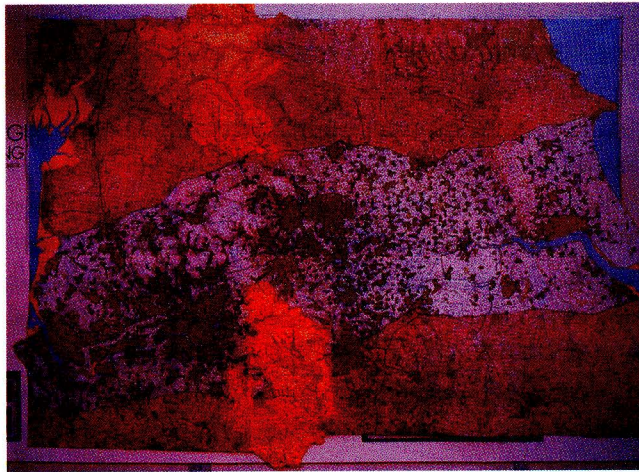
Despite the significance of the icons, it is the book *Grüne Landschaften* that contains the most comprehensive and integrated statement of their

[1]
Newton and Helen
Mayer Harrison,
installation with
map of the
Biodiversity Ring
and tile floor map
of lowland Holland,
*Vision for the Green
Heart of Holland*,
1996



[1]

[2]
Map of the Eco-
Urban Edge,
Casting a Green Net,
1998



[2]

philosophy. A readable, and at times compelling, document of almost 140 pages, this is devoted both to their vision for Europe and to the history and development of their work as artists.

Aside from the environmental solutions outlined, one of the book's most important arguments concerns the symbiotic relationship of cultural and ecological diversity. Given the importance of place within cultural evolution, the Harrisons argue, developing values that preserve ecological diversity works in parallel with a cultural environment that is itself heterogeneous and diverse. They are particularly critical of monocultures – economic, industrial, cultural or agricultural systems which suppress alternatives; these too, they maintain, are mutually supportive. At the same time they see a paradox, that where biodiversity requires continuity to flourish in the form of corridors linking one area to another, the development of cultural identity depends on separation. While they recognise the negative connotations that might be implied by cultural isolation, a homogenised culture based on unregulated markets and unrestricted information flow they perceive as by far the greater threat.⁵ Without ruling out the value of intercultural exchange, they argue for a more closed model of society, culturally and economically, which is protective of national and local interest, alongside a more consistent, transnational approach to providing for, and sustaining, natural resources. Any contradictions implicit in their proposal seem to be of no concern to the Harrisons; indeed they see contradiction as a healthy and natural condition that is essential to creativity.

The Harrisons' work derives from conceptual art making in the 1970s beginning with museum installations of small scale eco systems. Since then it has ventured far beyond the gallery and now relies on research into numerous fields of specialised practice and operation. Relatively few of their ideas are original and they acknowledge a debt to many individuals and groups concerned with similar issues. Their role is rather that of providing an overview for currents that as yet exist only in fragments and injecting existing dialogue with fresh energy. They admit to being weak in certain areas, primarily the intricacies of business and economic structures, although these do feature in their overall strategy. Their principal strength, they say, lies in scientific research, especially botany, and many of the invitations they receive come from scientists who accept their level of knowledge and recognise a common language.

⁵ Although the Harrisons are critical of both the media and internet in contributing to the erosion of local culture, they also recognise the potential of the internet to help organise and promote local initiatives, and use it themselves to provide information about their own work. It is the internet as a medium for centralised, hierarchical information systems that they see as destructive.

It was working with botanists that provided the opportunity in 1993 to create *Future Garden, Part I: The Endangered Meadows of Europe*. The work, which illustrated the potential for balance between human needs and those of the natural sphere in a self sustaining eco system, involved rolling up and installing several sections of ancient meadowland on the roof of the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn. The project has now been transferred to the city's parks and biodiversity is gradually returning to the urban environment.⁶ Other projects have investigated water systems, flood management, soil formation, forest regeneration and the effect of creating biodiversity zones around the edges of cities. Their most successful undertaking to date – *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland*, 1995 – proposed a series of strategies for protecting a large area of farmland in central Holland from encroaching development. This recommendation has been accepted by the Ministry for the Environment, has become part of the platform of the Green Party and has been incorporated into the regional planning process.

⁶ The exhibition was opened in Bonn by the Minister of the Environment, was seen by a quarter of a million people and was situated within sight of the former German Parliament building.

The Harrisons' vision for Europe rests on many of the measures already developed elsewhere and consists of three principal strands: reforestation, particularly on high ground not already in use for agriculture, with benefits in terms of providing wildlife corridors and habitats, oxygen production, absorption of carbon, water purification and sustainable levels of timber production; restoration of topsoil through large-scale composting of animal, industrial and human sewage; and lastly, a complex system of universal waste management through a combination of recycling for organic and non-biodegradable materials, and long term safe storage for toxic substances paid for by the manufacturers. A number of the measures outlined are consistent with EU policy for improving environmental quality. This is the third priority of the European parliament, and many ideas are already present within existing discourses.⁷ However, the Harrisons do not expect any of their objectives to be achieved through good will and consensus alone. The fulfilment of *Peninsula Europe* will depend on a high level of government intervention and subvention together with a radically revised tax structure in which one per cent of gross transnational product is reinvested into a European ecological and cultural security net.

⁷ Proposals made by Franz Fischler, Agriculture Minister for the EU for more sustainable and ecologically sound agricultural practice are already being adopted in parts of the continent, and the discourse for greening industry is also active. In addition, the EU is helping to protect regional cultural diversity by designating certain cities as cultural centres for a year.

The artists are aware of the dangers of appearing authoritarian or utopian. Moreover, they are no strangers to failure. An early work, *Sacramento*

Meditations made in the mid 1970s examined the land and water uses of California's Central Valley. Comprising a series of maps exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art and an extensive public media and poster campaign, it was, in their words, "buried under an avalanche of indifferent silence". Another project in Leipzig in which they proposed reclaiming a large area of land devastated by open brown pit mining in the early 1990s and transforming it into a national park, has so far met with no response. And there remains the disappointment with their work in the Pennines, particularly since research there produced what they consider to be one of their most significant discoveries: that by the collection and extensive treatment of domestic and industrial sewage and its redistribution as humus across existing farmland, benefits to topsoil would be dramatic, improving moisture absorption, reducing nitrogen, and increasing food production. This discovery has now become a central plank in their vision for Europe but little attempt has been made, they say, to make their theory more widely known.

Ironically, the reason seems to be less to do with intractability on the part of the English authorities than restrictive legislation from Europe concerning uses of human waste, and increasing public anxiety in all countries over agricultural practices in the light of the BSE crisis. According to Professor Handley, human sewage is being used in the Pennine region on derelict or damaged land to aid an extensive programme of reforestation. Hence the Harrisons' recommendation to increase forest coverage over high ground to 17% (the European standard) is likely in the long term to become a reality although such proposals were already included in government environmental policies several years ago. Professor Handley adds that whether or not specific proposals made by the Harrisons are put into practice is not the point. The value of their work, which he believes is considerable, lies in establishing certain environmental principles – sustainability, natural diversity and the recycling of waste material – and visualising and communicating these in relation to scale. In this respect, he sees the icons as an immensely important device for creating a new iconography of the area and for demonstrating the idea of unity based on an innovative and visionary planning model.

Meanwhile *Grüne Landschaften*, now in its third printing, has sold 12,000 copies and the website, setting out the main principles of the project, has been up and running for six months. The Harrisons have recently secured funding

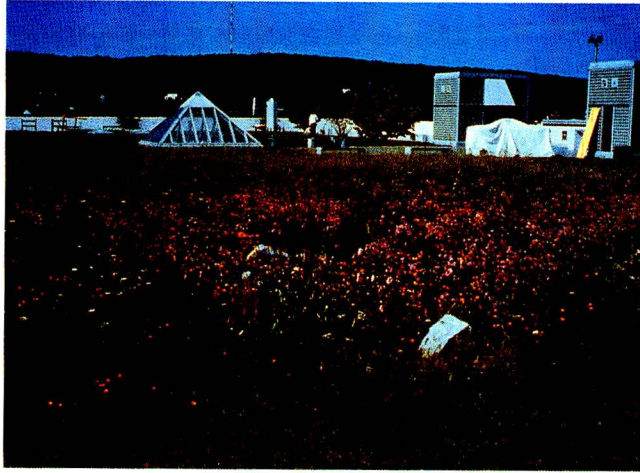
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The meadow in bloom on the roof, *Future Garden, Part 1: The Endangered Meadows of Europe*, 1995

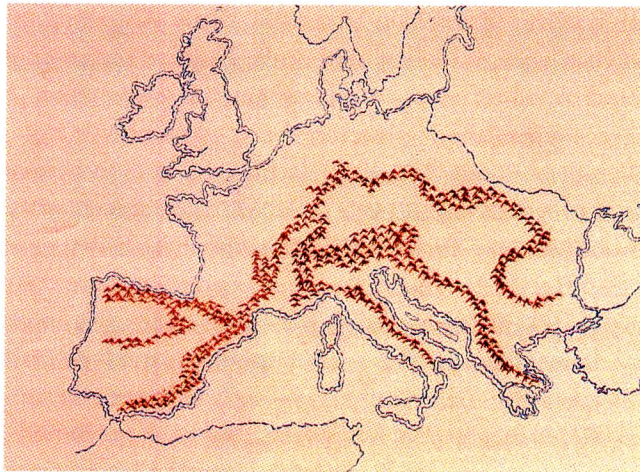
Future Garden, Part 1 consisted of a 40,000 square foot meadow installed on the roof of the Kunst aus Ausstellungshalle in Bonn, and 15 story boards which told the story of other meadows from the Alps, plains and coastal regions of Germany, France, Spain, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Austria and Sweden.

[4]

Drawing of the mountains and high grounds, *Peninsula Europe*, 2000



[3]



[4]

from the European Commission and the German government to develop the icons which will form part of a touring exhibition in 2001-2. Five museums and other venues in France, Germany and elsewhere have so far committed themselves to presenting the work with the first, Potsdam City Hall, anticipating 250,000 visitors. Altogether, the Harrisons estimate that the combined audience for the project including the book, website and exhibition will total up to four million people. They do not expect any quick results and acknowledge formidable political, economic and cultural obstacles. But Newton Harrison says he is aiming for a 60% success rate; he describes himself as a realist rather than an optimist.

Whether or not these predictions are accurate, the mechanisms the Harrisons have employed for *Peninsula Europe* suggest a change of strategy – that they are now venturing beyond the art world to find more direct ways of engaging with the general public. This would appear to be a sensible move. The five maps and other visual material commissioned for *Casting a Green Net* are currently languishing in a corridor of Manchester Metropolitan University until it is decided to whom they belong and what should be done with them. Were these to be reproduced at scale (three by four and a half metres) and displayed in a major public space (such as a railway station), they could be seen and enjoyed by thousands of people daily. Whatever its appetite for environmental politics, or indeed for discourse, process or collaboration, the art world is a system still fundamentally geared to the exchange and display of discrete products. In terms of the population at large, they are seen by the few and acted upon by fewer still.

Davina Thackara is Editor of Public Art Journal.