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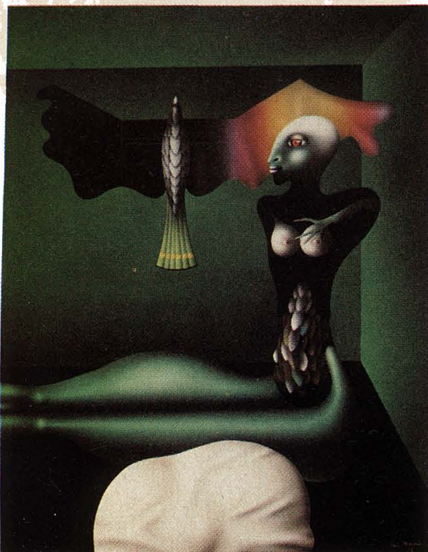

The art of Paul Wunderlich graces our thirty-seventh cover. The artist's compositions come from his inner reflections and a life-long struggle between intellectualism and spontaneous expression. Omni is proud to present a gallery of Wunderlich's work starting on page 126.

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PERFORMANCE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38

energy efficient. Moreover, the farms they celebrated were really just images of the huge, agricultural systems that destroy land and water purity in many areas. "We saw we had built an inherently alienated metaphor," they say, "and then the work took a great change in direction."

The Harrisons took a year off, training themselves in ecology, "so we could get past the gesture. We read omnivorously," Helen says, "and then we would sit and talk." Eventually these breakfast-table conversations evolved into a formal dialogue with definite characters and voices, which the Harrisons performed, published, and inscribed, in elaborately "scrawled" didactic and poetic messages, on the work itself.

Their new projects attacked a vast range of ecological concerns. There was the "Duck and Snail Promenade" in the La Jolla Museum—a drama in which ducks were unleashed on samples of the pesky snails that plague southern California gardens. The performing ducks finished off the *escargots*, then waddled on to gobble up the museum garden, demonstrating, they say, "that one-step solutions to ecological problems last as long as it does to take a step."

In 1977 they created earth on a barren rock quarry by invoking city councils near the ArtPark site in Upstate New York to dump diggings from a new sewer line, along with other organic wastes, then plant a meadow—"a portrait of a thousand-year natural process, collapsed into ten years." Helen and Newton investigated the San Gabrielino Indians, who inhabited the San Gabriel Valley before the white man came, a paradigm of an ecologically conscious society. They remained preoccupied with water, too, studying various waterways, the Great Lakes and oceans and river systems, and creating "Meditations" from their observations, or giant blow-ups of maps with droll written addenda, revealing the way the world's water is divided and polluted by survival-threatening systems of possession, consumption, and profit.

Their ecological art often necessitated scientific experiments. A search for a hardy aquatic creature that would survive museum conditions—better than their catfish had—introduced them to *Scylla serrata*, an edible, cannibalistic crab from Sri Lanka. They began to raise the *Scylla* in tanks at Pepper Canyon, designed to replicate exactly the crabs' native estuarial lagoon. "Suddenly the crabs began to act strangely," the Harrisons wrote in their memorial to the endeavor, *The Book of the Crab*. "They stopped eating our food; they stopped eating each other. They even stopped moving around much." The Harrisons discovered that the one element lacking in the crabs' California environment was the Asian monsoon. And so they created an artificial version by spraying the *Scylla* with fresh water from a hose. The "monsoon" changed the salinity of the water, restored the captives to health and sanity, and inspired them to mate—a feat no oceanographer had yet accomplished. This won the artists a coveted Sea Grant from Scripps.

The crab adventure led the Harrisons to Sri Lanka, and to the first of their current series of projects, an epic oeuvre called "The Lagoon Cycle," purchased in advance by Metromedia, a media conglomerate that invests in artworks and that considers the Harrisons' ecological ideas highly advanced, more so than Jacques Cousteau's. "The First Lagoon" records the artists' search for *Scylla serrata* in its native culture, human and otherwise, in a collage of panels, featuring drawings, enlarged maps, flags, tinted photos, and the usual scrawled observations, a dialogue between two characters with two varying viewpoints, the Lagoonmaker and the Witness. The Lagoonmaker represents "an updated Bucky Fuller type," or "megalomania with a conscience," and the Witness reacts to and judges the Lagoonmaker's projects. The complexity of the ideas exchanged between the two counterpoints the childlike quality of the visual art, reminiscent of an oversized, sophisticated entry in a high-school science fair. Lagoons, in general, fascinate the Harrisons because "in the place where fresh and salt waters meet" they see a metaphor for culture as a whole. ("Life is tough and rich in the lagoons. . . . Like all of us, it must improvise its existence.")

The Harrisons' work often attempts to reveal the nearsighted absurdity of trying to resolve ecological problems, "the result of an entire system of beliefs," with a simple "enlightened" solution. In "The Fifth Lagoon," for example, the Lagoonmaker proposes reclaiming the Salton Sea, an inland body of water near San Diego that is heavily polluted with agricultural wastes, by flushing it into the Pacific via a channel cut through the mountains, then making a polycultural fish farm out of it. The project simultaneously proposes that the fish-farm idea be abandoned when the Witness notes, "Once you flush the dirty Salton Sea into the ocean, who's going to flush the ocean?"

To research "The Fifth Lagoon," Newton cruised the Salton Sea in a boat. "I began to spend all my time on this agricultural sewer," he said. "I felt like I owned it. I even began to like its terrible smell. Every project in 'The Lagoon Cycle' bespeaks a direct and intense personal experience."

In their studio, appropriately a converted water tank on the campus of the University of California at San Diego, the Harrisons deny they are "problem solvers." "We get asked by virtually everybody, 'Are you solving our crisis?' " Newton says. "The answer is no. These problems are epidemic and need collective resolution. There will not be individual heroes. We are storytellers. Our art is about direct engagement. We engage as best we can." ∞

PERFORMANCE

THE ARTS

By Vicki E. Lindner

In the late Sixties artist Newton Harrison was teaching a class in formalist art at a California university. He held up an example of modular, minimalist sculpture to his students and raved, "Look how smart this modular is, how good it is," and suddenly it didn't look very good at all. Now Harrison says, "In fact, it looked rather dumb! Information about ecological problems had been seeping in by osmosis, and it seemed to me the most important question of this century was how we will get to the next. With the crucial issue of survival in mind, a lot of the art done in the Sixties looked silly to me." Newton's wife, Helen Mayer Harrison, a social scientist, concurred. Her in-depth studies of institutions had led her to believe that survival was at stake in the social world as well as in the natural world. "Saddled with these insights," the Harrisons say, "we didn't know what to do with them."

By 1970 they knew. Newton's five glow-discharge chambers, an artificial aurora borealis, had created a stir at the Expo '70 Art and Technology show, and the curator asked him to do a similar piece for the opening in Los Angeles. In a dialogue that was the beginning of one of the art world's most unusual collaborations, the Harrisons began to discuss water. What could you do with *water*? A fountain? A waterfall? "No," Newton retorted. "I'm going to do *life*!"

Life manifested itself in the first of the Harrisons' survival pieces, "Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Salt Works with the Addition of Brine Shrimp," which used the problem of the diminishing world food supply as a metaphor for a new kind of art. The Harrisons consulted with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, in San Diego, and learned they could grow brine shrimp, a popular candidate for Third World food, and *Dunaliella* algae, food for the shrimp, in a simple, discrete ecosystem. They constructed a 20′ × 40′ pond made of redwood and divided it into four sections, adding a different amount of salt to each. The algae and shrimp, each of which has a high tolerance for changes in salinity, thrived. The shrimp ate the algae, which fed on sunlight and dollar-a-gallon plant food, and changed color dramatically from deep green to brick-red as they absorbed more keratin to cope with rising levels of salinity in the tank. The result: a new, biologically based aesthetic in a museum environment. The Harrisons harvested the shrimp, but they found them hopelessly inedible, unless mixed with capers and anchovies—an unlikely staple for the hungry Third World.

Committed to pooling their talents for their new art, the Harrisons then began growing miniature indoor farms under lights, using the minimalists' modular shapes for the farms' containers. What they were saying was, "We'll grow things in your sterile cubes and squares, and they will read as indoor meadows. Their care will generate performances." Helen did the performances, which framed the rituals of planting, growing, harvesting, and feasting.

The survival pieces took the Harrisons with an elegant catfish farm to London. They planned to commemorate the opening of a show, "Eleven Los Angeles Artists," by electrocuting the thick-skulled fish (the most humane way to kill them), skinning and cleaning them in a performance dance, then serving a down-home soul food feast of catfish and hush puppies to the black-tie British elite.

The British, however, had been importing little Italian catfish for their aquariums and vehemently protested this symbolic murder of their pets. The Humane Society let out an enraged bellow; celebrity Spike Milligan smashed the pane of the catfish tank with a rock to protest a museum's condoning the slaughter of animals. Newton publicly complimented the British on their "paranoia," and the other artists threatened to withdraw from the show if the Harrisons were denied their performance. In the end the Harrisons won out, the catfish were executed and served, and all the furor, they say, only helped make the point—that food does not appear by magic on our plates, and we bear responsibility for our own nourishment.

In 1974 Helen took a hard look at their survival pieces and noted they were not

CONTINUED ON PAGE 188

The Lagoon at Uppuveli: *Like all of us, the lagoon must improvise its existence.*