

Pay Attention: To Make Art

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The book stands up. It becomes a mural book, covered with drawings and graffiti. It moves. It's a cinema-book, a forest-book. The countryside is transformed into a journey. An animation of signs ushers in the work. The space bubbling over, the festive streets, celebrate the waking of what seems asleep in ordinary life, from the pond where the crab lies to the roar of the Pacific, a noise from an apparently conquered and calmed origin. If you pay attention, everyday things reveal their savage and stubborn existence. "Pay attention to the flow ..." (Sixth Lagoon). Simply paying attention guarantees the transformation from a nature supposedly asleep to the work that displays nature's strange vitality. Art is what attention makes with nature.

The work of Helen and Newton Harrison is based on that premise. "It's difficult," they say, "to read a forest." In the maze of roads that their maps and poems draw, we can uncover the gestures that have organized it for many years (1972–84). *The Lagoon Cycle* is at once the theater for and the result of a series of acts to which various aspects of this animated book correspond: maps, metaphors, narratives, dialogues, politics. Those elements call out to each other. Together they form a cycle. They intertwine. To distinguish them is to bring out the movement that puts them in play together.

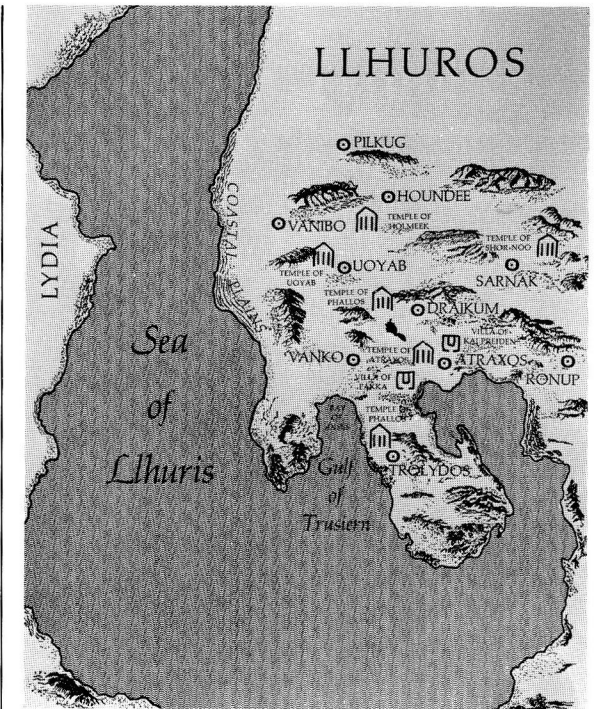
Maps

The founding gesture is to make a map. It creates a space. It cuts out of the complexity of things a scene on which to draw the operations necessary to remake a world. It is the origin of painting and of writing. Born of a withdrawal and designed

for a purpose, the map isolates a theater and offers it up to be transformed. But that working ground also represents the reality from which the map distinguishes itself in order to change it. *The Lagoon Cycle* has as its beginning and end the representation of the entire globe. That is the extent both of its ambition and of the domain it gives itself.

The globe appears here as a contrast between the scientific projection of its lands and the idealized, indefinite, enveloping blue of its seas. A dialectic is begun, not only between land and sea (leitmotiv of the work), but between what exists and what is possible. The map joins, in effect, what *is* to what *could be*. The art of observing is combined with the art of inventing. The vision that analyzes is joined with the vision that prophesies. The map re-presents. It describes an inventable world. It shows in the present the movement that will carry it to the future. That is the artistic concept the Harrisons have created for themselves. They have made a map on which to recount the project of "making earth."

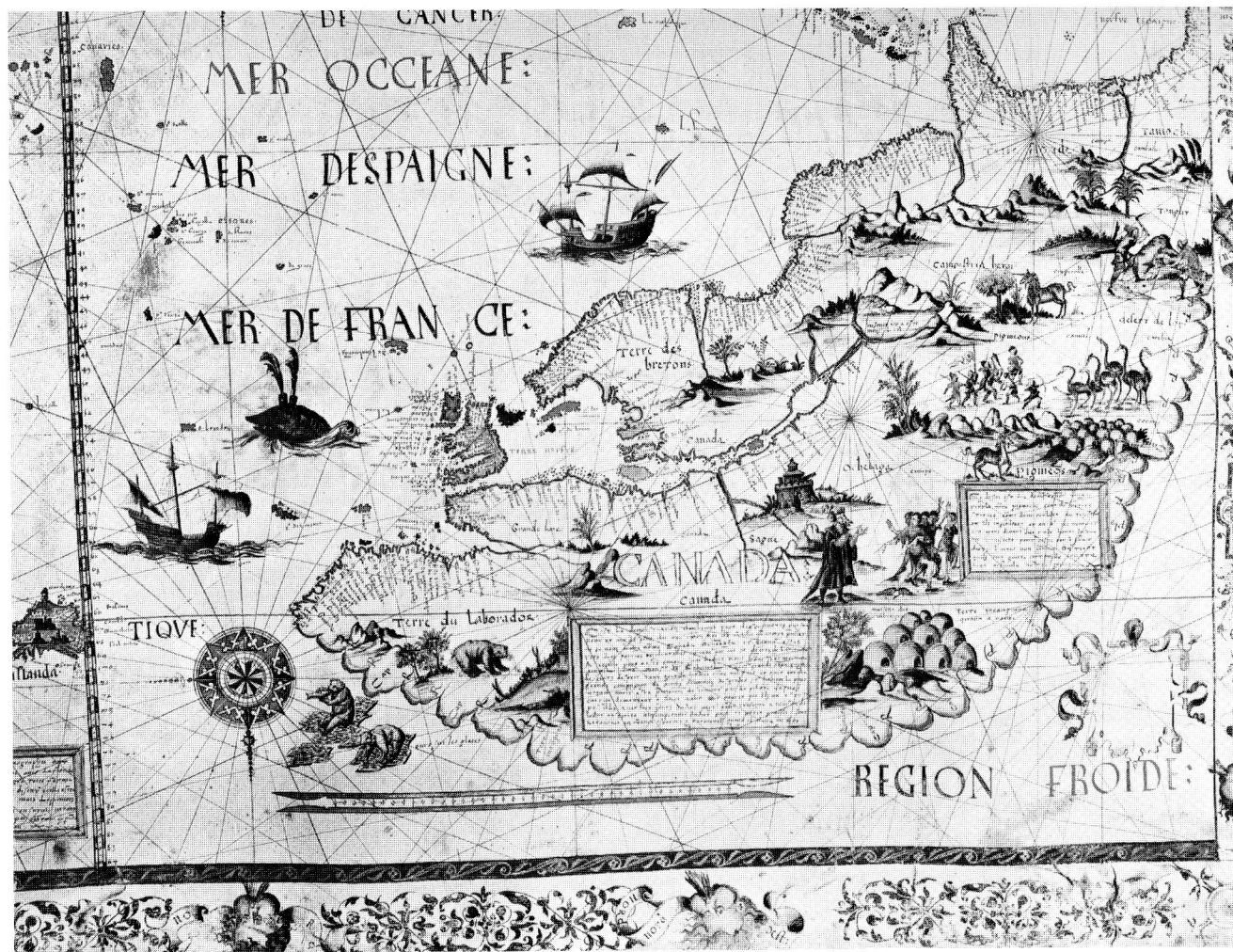
That concept of art is inscribed in the cartographic tradition of the Renaissance, when the discovery of the New World made represented territory an interlace of the passion of seeing and the passion of creating. Sixteenth-century maps attach to the conquests of the observing eye its visionary follies. Ancestral or futuristic dreams of legendary worlds creep in everywhere: mythic animals, societies still living in the golden age, ships with sails inflated by occidental ambitions, and spirits puffing out excesses of desire. The careful presentation of observed data has its double everywhere.¹ Thus in the Harrisons' map, as in the lagoon, the bitter waters of knowledge mix with the sweet waters of desire. Sometimes



A map of Llhuros, an imaginary country, 1972, by Norman Daly (courtesy of the artist)

Translated by Thomas DiPiero.

1. Cf. Fredi Chiapelli, ed., *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*. 2 vols. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976); J. H. Parry, *The Discovery of South America* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1979).



A detail of a world map, 1550, by Pierre Desceliers (courtesy of the British Library Board, London)

they clash, and sometimes they blend. The map is sometimes a battleground, sometimes a garden of love, but there is no way to stop the dynamics of the relations.

Rather than an opposition, as in *Maps and Dreams*,² we see here a subtler tension. The mixture is an alchemical one. A gentle irony casts suspicion on the seriousness of the plan, and at the same time the precision of the project ladens the illusion with solemnity. Everywhere the Harrisons introduce into their representation of things another way of seeing them: there are

2. Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982). A single territory of British Columbia is the location of a war between the map of its industrial exploitation (oil and gas) and the map of its Indian utilization (fishing and hunting).

photographs, but they're painted; there are scientific maps, but they're revised (re-envisioned) by the future that is drawn on them. The technical representation of an area is a tool the artist uses to see it as it will be, or as it could be. To see things in that way, in the movement that opens up another space for them, is to see them metaphorically.

Metaphors

The Harrisons' art therefore defines itself as metaphorical thinking. The Lagoons make metaphors visible and readable. How do they accomplish that? Metaphors designate transits; they assure passage from one place to another. Even today in Athens the mass transit system between cities is called *metaphor*. The Lagoons are a kind of mass transit system. But their voyages are internal. They effect movement in and of cartographic space. They cause space itself to travel.

The process of internal transport is indicated first of all by the insinuation of text into the image. The gap between things and the future they hide is shown to us by a continual tension between the image and the writing. Before signifying anything, before being really read, the writing implants into the iconic space a different kind of space, a space of readability. It is an absence, an area removed from visibility, and related to a past or future that each graphic sign postulates. A historicity (a loss, a future) is written in the visual space. It affronts space with time. It shatters the synchronic tranquillity offered to the eye with linguistic figures that trace, throughout the image, what is not yet, and may never be, visible: the very movement of things. In that respect, writing plays the same role here as mirrors do in fifteenth-century Flemish painting. Mirrors constitute a second scene in those paintings, in which an invisible secret is announced. The writing here is such a mirror, a second scene, that introduces the invisible in the visible. For the Harrisons the two scenes coexist. There is writing in the image, and we go from one to the other. The transportation, the metaphor, is that doublet. Space as cartographic image and space as page of writing, at first distinct, crisscross and interlace little by little within a single frame. There are two spaces in a single place.

That is the basic definition of *metaphor*: two in one. Aristotle said that metaphor is, for a single sense, the means of passage from one form to another; there are two places for one sense.

Here we have two spaces (two forms) for a single narrow place, without any sense, strictly speaking, but the movement from one to the other. It is not a question of displacement; the entire work is put into metaphor by the play between two forms of expression that everywhere open up the beautiful, static icon of place to a historical process. This work of metaphor also disrupts the usual system of making the image an illustration of the text and the text the truth of the image. The metaphor effects, instead, mutual attractions. In the frame of the image the text finds a spatial existence, punctuated in black and white, drawn in verse and with a shape.³ For its part, the icon leans toward writing; it is furnished with proper names and explanatory fragments; it narrates itself. Metaphor is above all the mutual work of one space on another.

To that physical structure of the work is added its content, completely metaphoric: the lagoon. *The Lagoon Cycle* tells how the metaphor works. Like a tale ("once upon a time in a land far away"), it begins in the distance with the lagoons of Sri Lanka. In the beginning there is a treasure island in an orient full of legend and wisdom, where the conflicting waters coexist. But the treasure that the Harrisons, in 1972, went hunting for in the Sri Lankan city of Colombo was not the treasure that led Christopher Columbus, in 1492, to set out for the East Indies. Columbus was in quest of gold to revive the Old World's economy. Today's Californians go to the Third World, and its poverty, in search of a treasure hidden in the mud of the world like the primal secret of survival. Their voyage toward origins is analogous to their investigation of the Gabrielino Indians. But in Colombo their voyage leads them to a place just short of human society, in fact, short of noble animal societies, where a primitive and mythic monster, a cannibal, *Scylla serrata* (Forskål) the crab, struggles and allies itself with the muck of nature, in the mud of Negombo, Trincomalee, or Upouveli. There we find the lagoon, hero of the Cycle:

An estuarial lagoon is the place where fresh and salt waters meet and mix. It is a fragile meeting and mixing, not having the constancy of the oceans or the rivers. It is a collaborative adventure. Its existence is always at risk. . . . Life in the lagoon is tough, and very rich. It breeds quickly.

3. Cf. Jeffrey Smitten and Ann Daghistany, *Spatial Form in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). The Harrisons' work is inscribed in the contemporary trend that spatializes the narrative.

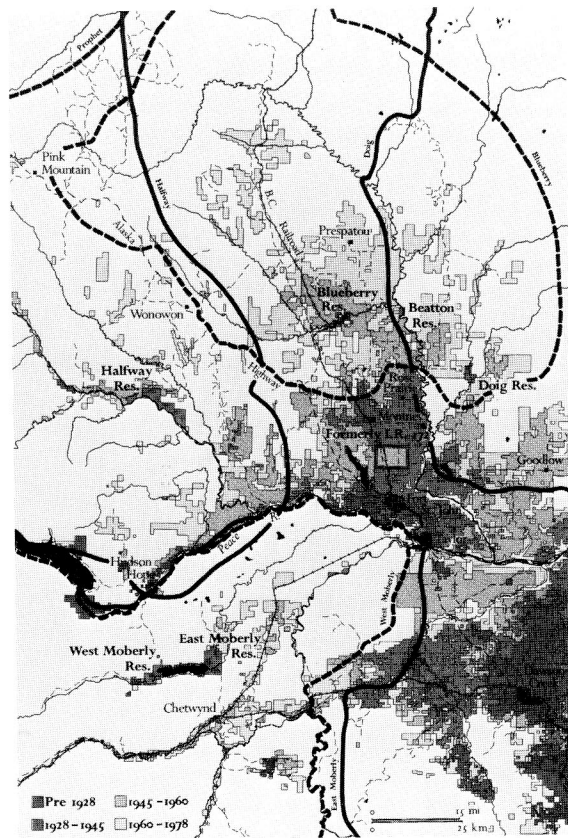
Like all of us, it must improvise its existence, very creatively, with the materials at hand. But the materials keep changing. Only the improvisation remains constant. (Third Lagoon, panel 5)

From the outset the lagoon seems displaceable, that is, metaphorizable. In it the Harrisons recognize the structure—the system and the model—of an ecological unit. In its original place, in Sri Lanka, it already represents a fundamental, biological economy. The lagoon mirrors that economy. The artists see the dismal lagoon landscape as a metaphor for a dialogic network between the elements, and for a style of existence. Therefore it can be transported to other locales. In bringing "some crabs and some bottom mud and some mangrove seeds and whatever" to San Diego, the Harrisons render explicit the distance between what the photographs represent of the lagoon in Trincomalee or in Upouveli and what the Harrisons saw there. The San Diego basin is a metaphor for the lagoon in Sri Lanka, which is already a metaphor. Therefore the lagoon can be transported again and again, and on other scales: in the Colorado Desert, in the Salton Sea (Fourth Lagoon), and so on. It can be generalized up to the Pacific Ocean and beyond—there are "no boundaries."

The lagoon doesn't merely conquer vaster and vaster areas; it also reaches different levels of reality. The model that it furnishes is repeated in the Cycle in its several domains. It defines the crab, the scientific experiment, culture, and so on, and finally discovers itself: "A discourse is a fragile, transitory form, an improvisation of sorts" (Sixth Lagoon, panel 2). Those heteronomous fields are touched and set in motion by the model first revealed on the beaches of Sri Lanka.

Finally, while the advancing metaphorization of space creates an effervescence and is translated by a series, in turn transgressive and humorous, of poetic "happenings," it is nevertheless rigorously logical. It is striking, for example, that the steps of "metaphorical thinking" in the Cycle have "as if" as their formulation, the logical figure to which most of Jeremy Bentham's *Theory of Fictions* is dedicated.⁴ "If this, then that" (Fifth and Sixth Lagoon), "If this, then not that" (Sixth Lagoon), and so on. That thought process, which

4. C. K. Ogden, *Bentham's Theory of Fictions* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932).



Different perceptions of the same geographical area. Above: An Indian hunting territory on the Doig River Reserve. Opposite: The spread of white settlement into Indian hunting territory, including the Doig River Reserve. (From *Maps and Dreams*, by Hugh Brody. Copyright © 1982 by Hugh Brody. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.)

sustains *The Lagoon Cycle*, posits at the same time a logic and a belief. Its logic is to start with a model, which it takes as a hypothesis (“if this”), and to draw from that model all positive (“then that”) and negative (“then not that”) conclusions. The belief consists in being implicated at risk, which deems it capable of transforming things. “A metaphor can be a powerful instrument if we believe it. If we enact it, it will develop a life of its own” (Second Lagoon, panel 2). “Attend to the discourse between belief systems and environmental systems” (Sixth Lagoon, panel 6). Articulated through a certain logic, the belief sustains all the movement. After all, what is that belief if not an opening up to another space, not yet visible, in the visible space? The belief is the presumption that there is something else in what one sees. It is the hypothesis itself and the jurisdiction of metaphor.

Narratives

If the metaphor works” (Second Lagoon), what happens? *The Lagoon Cycle* tells us. Therefore it’s a novel, “a picaresque novel,” the Harrisons say. I also see here an epic, the unfolding of a narration in the space created by a myth, the narrative articulation of a mythic field. The lagoon here is mythic; it joins opposites and furnishes a model for each economy of relations between living creatures and their environment. Like all traditional myths, it is the story of the genesis of origins: the rich mud, the primitive mixing of the waters, the savage cannibal that is the crab. It is in the distant past of the irrational and the primitive that future ecological rationality is founded. Such is the paradox of myth, where the beginning and the end coincide.

The capacity of giving birth to a new myth is a seductive one in the Harrisons’ work. Their artistic ambition is to create a world. “To make earth,” they say, “seems to be a reasonable activity given the propensity of other forms of activity to make deserts.”⁵ The artist is, then, a lagoonmaker, a maker of life. In fact, his or her ambition is less to make a world than to remake one, to give it back to life. It is haunted by the prospect of a salvation whose condition is compliance with life’s laws, revealed by the lagoon. Curiously, a long religious tradition underlies the generation myth.

From the outset, the Harrisons’ narration shaped itself into seven stages. Its first title was “Seven Steps to the Sea.” Seven, like the days in the biblical Genesis, like the rivers of the Buddhist crossing—is a perfect number for a cycle. The narration gives the historical development of the lagoon paradigm. It follows the stages of the artistic-scientific experiment: (1) the discovery of the lagoons in Sri Lanka; (2) the artificial lagoons in San Diego and the habits of the cannibal crabs; (3) the commercial expansion of the single-lagoon experiment; (4) the development of a self-sustaining multicultural system thanks to diversification in the lagoons; (5) the cycle of projects concerned with joining the Salton Sea to the Gulf of California; (6) the development of a model to its logical extension, from the waters of the Colorado River to the Gulf of California; and (7) the revival of the Pacific through a network of aquacultural systems and through the internationalization of the ocean.

In the course of the narration, scientific observation and utopian perspective are inversely proportional. Observation dwindles as the dream grows. The final stages explicitly mark, moreover, a progressive detachment from experimentation and a utopic amplification: “I reentered the space of my own dreaming” (Sixth Lagoon, panel 1). It is in the Fourth Lagoon that the proportions reverse themselves, that the dream carries itself away from the working site, escaping more and more from it. It is there that the simple system becomes a complex one. With the advent of stage four there is a qualitative leap, a break in the narration. Thenceforth the dream takes over. From the observation that causes the dream we proceed to the dream that incites experimentation. The style changes. Even though the constituent elements remain, their relationship has changed.

The Fourth Lagoon is the pivot point. From the First through the Third Lagoon, photographs and drawings predominate; from the Fourth Lagoon on, maps take over. From the First through the Third Lagoon the blue of the regenerating water sets the tone; beginning with the Fourth Lagoon it’s up to the ocher of the deserts to do the regenerating. From the First through the Third Lagoon objects occupy the scene; from the Fourth Lagoon onward it’s projects. A network of quotations takes us from the map of Sri Lanka and the red of its blazon, at the beginning, to the photograph of the buffalo and the blue of the Pacific, at the end. Through its gradations and its movement, a general architecture is drawn.

5. Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, “Notes on a Recent Project,” *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal* 16 (October–November 1977): 28.

The narration is progressively detached from observable reality to express a belief in another reality: "Pay attention to the flow of beliefs and the willing of desire" (Sixth Lagoon, panel 6). Confronted more and more with the massiveness of an ecological disaster and the vastness of spaces devoid of life (ocher and black), the narration forsakes the tranquil recesses of origins to demand an excess of dreams and desire, before the photograph of the buffalo and the countryman, the believers, returns at the very end like a final summation of memory and a metaphor of tenacity.

Another characteristic of the narration is that it's a story without a character. The actors are replaced by narrators who are speaking separately and in separate locations about the lagoon, the only actor, in this case a mute one. As in many contemporary novels, the story surfaces only through the language of witnesses. It is hidden/shown through a proliferation of announcements, visual and verbal, that also disclose the very nature of the narration, haunted by what it can neither reunite nor give up. Through the witnesses (photographs, maps, audible remarks, etc.) *The Lagoon Cycle* speaks of itself and of its relationship to the mythic treasure from which it resulted. All the witnesses speak, in different languages, of what art is.

There are two major testimonies throughout *The Lagoon Cycle*: on the one hand, the representation of the successive mutations of the lagoon, that is, paintings; on the other hand, the *expression* of the experiences and progressive meditations of the Lagoonmaker and the Witness, that is, poetry in prose form. Those two testimonies alternately set their sights on the real actor, absent and unappropriable, like a god, silent and anonymous, who makes the narration work without ever having been captured in the images or the words. The true lagoon isn't seen; it causes seeing. It doesn't speak; it causes speech.

It is indeed a matter of mythic narration. Therefore there is not, in the end, a final destiny, or resolution. The many witnesses, at first scattered, concentrate little by little on an opposition that doesn't concern them but concerns the readers and spectators of *The Lagoon Cycle*: will they or will they not believe the myth? The narration progressively separates the witnesses into two types. At one extreme are the inflexible ones, the rationalists, the exploiters, and those who would take over the lagoon; at the other extreme are the attentive ones, those who participate in the metaphor, those who "pay attention."

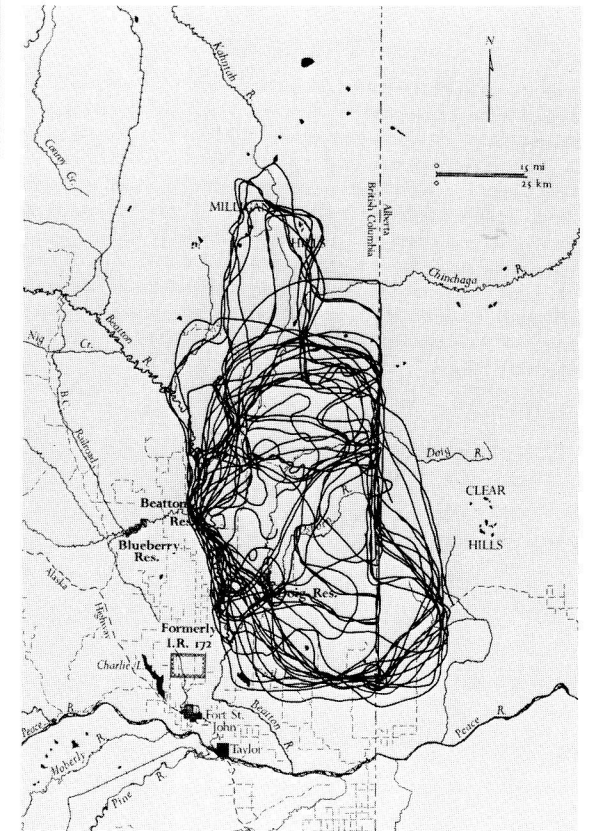
The narration also tries to produce its true readers. It seeks to include artists. It is more performative than narrative.

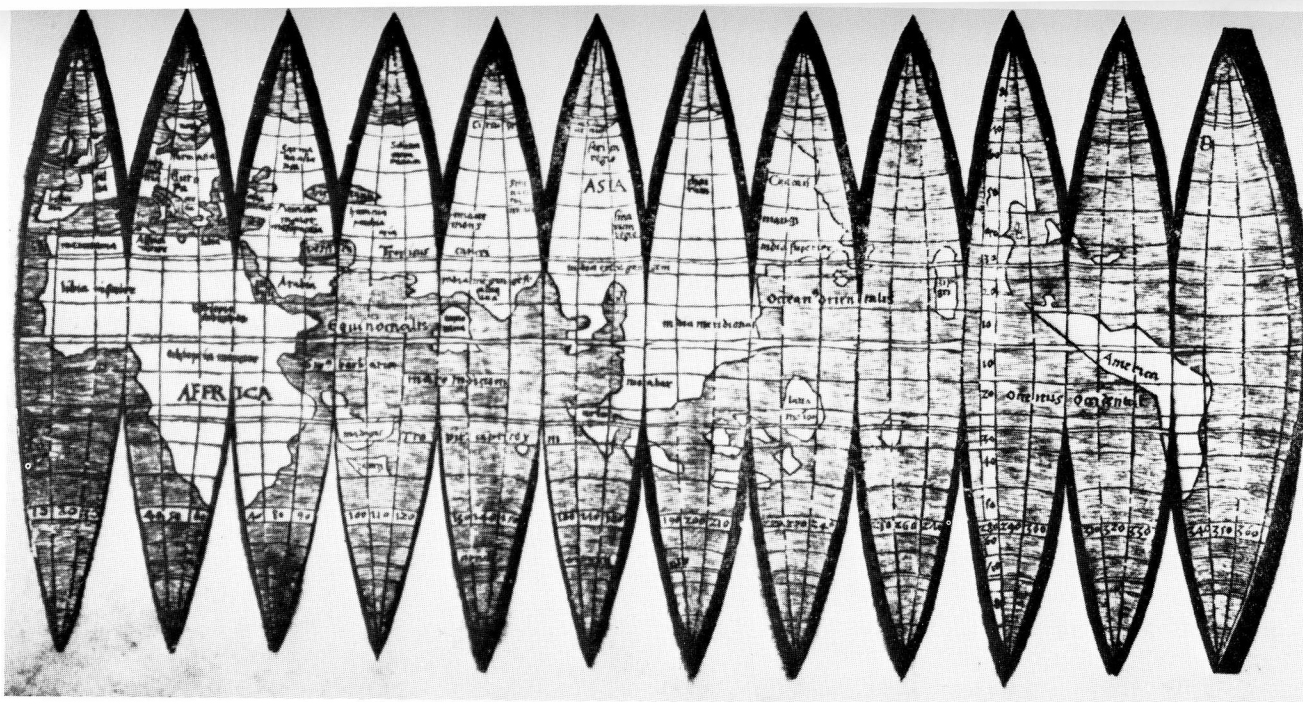
Dialogues

The Seventh Lagoon returns to dialogue, the energy of all stories. At its end the Cycle repeats its point of departure: it is only through each other's invention that we can "re-invent ourselves" (introductory panel). Dialogue is the style of the work. It characterizes all the elements we have already seen: maps, in their relationship with writing; metaphor, in its context (the lagoon, "a place where fresh and salt waters meet and mix"); and in its conquering course (play and movement between distinct spaces); and the narration, in its network of speakers who mimic the relationship between the entire discourse and its readers. Dialogue defines the manner in which language is treated, the gesture that specifies a usage of language, a way of functioning. The entire work is a dialogue. Its manner is dialogue.

Like a fugue, *The Lagoon Cycle* multiplies all the possible modulations of dialogue in a system in which they echo each other endlessly in different tones and registers. It will suffice to show a few examples. What is striking, first of all, is the proliferation of phrases marking speakers: "I said," "You said," "He said," "We said," "They said." The discourse always puts the act of saying, which looms up everywhere, into the limelight. The network of dialogue gradually narrows in on the interlace of the speech of the Lagoonmaker (Fourth Lagoon) and the Witness (Fifth Lagoon). The various speakers are brought back to that duo, which becomes the voice of the discourse. The dramatization of speech acts leads to a more central experience: the work speaks in two voices, like the lagoon in which the two waters mix.

If one considers what the images and the texts present, not how they present it, one finds the same dialogic process. The lagoon is drawn first from afar as though glimpsed or half heard through fragments of conversation about it. It is sketched in the hubbub of "They say." It appears, an anonymous wealth of melodious waters, only through what is said of it by its witness and interlocutor, the fisherman of Upouveli. Thus will it be throughout the Cycle. No being exists independently of what the dialogue makes of him or her. Amorous or cannibalistic relationships between crabs, as well as the equivocations between the scientific types or businessmen and the artists, form dual interplays. There are





Globe Gore, 1507, by Martin Waldseemüller (courtesy of the James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis)

also triangular interplays; for example, “the crabs,” “us,” and “him” (the entrepreneur) (Third Lagoon). Everywhere the story shows conversations, up to the “dialogue” between the Colorado River and the Gulf of California (Sixth Lagoon) and to the “discourse between fire and rock” (Seventh Lagoon, panel 1) and “between belief systems and environmental systems” (Sixth Lagoon, panel 6).

Between is the key word. It designates the space and the nature of the discourse. How can one not recognize that it is what the Harrisons call discourse—that is, dialogue—the form of their artistic experience together, that has produced this work? The mysterious alchemy of their research together for twelve years has provided this symbolization, which magnifies the dialogue form by effacing the distinctions between the two authors. This is an unusual pair, in fact. Newton’s background is in painting and sculpture, while Helen’s is in literature, anthropology, and psychology. He delves into the sensory aspects of things while she is on the move, like ideas. Newton is more fixed, like land, and Helen is more flowing, like water. “Aquaculture” might be their common signature. A marriage of earth and water, their work speaks in two voices, belonging to neither. Even while explaining their work, one will begin a phrase and the other

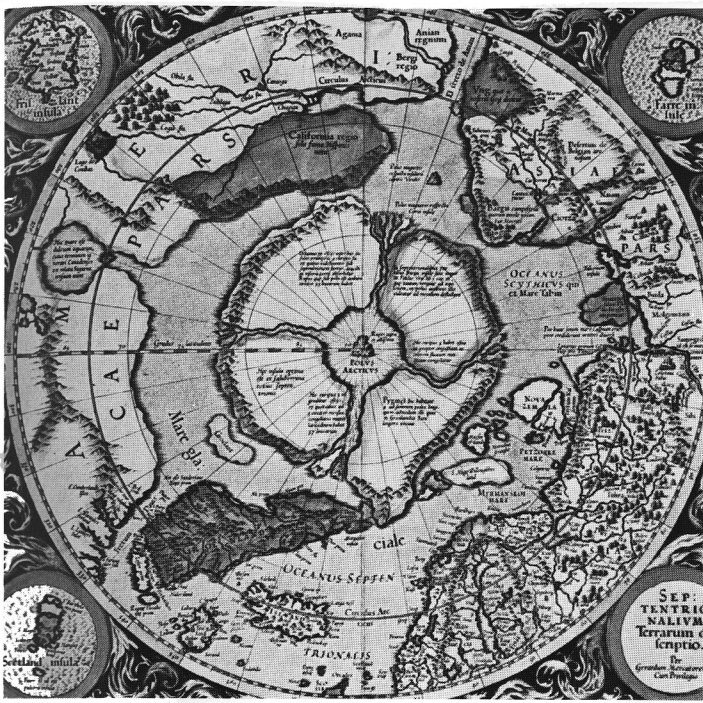
will finish it. Whose sentence was it? It is a “between” utterance, like the work itself. Discourse produces itself by disowning its authors. It eliminates them in being born of them. As opposed to commercial exploitation, which tries to appropriate the lagoon network for private goals (Third Lagoon), this art forms a new earth by undoing ownership; it is itself dialogue.

The experience has universal value: “All of nature is collaboration.” *The Lagoon Cycle* in turn calls for a dialogue with its visitors. Far from being a distant and closed work, it waits for the questions and desires of those that pass by, questions that creep into the vast spaces of its panels and poems. As a whole it resembles the strong and salty waters into which can mix the sweet waters, introduced by intersecting curiosities, to form a broader lagoon. That is probably the sense of the “I,” which linguistically symbolizes the position of a text with respect to an expected “you.” The discourse itself says to its addressees: “I began to desire your desires. . . . I reentered the space of my own dreaming” (Sixth Lagoon, panel 1). In that way the duality of the Helen-Newton couple can erase itself. That couple is only the metaphor of a passage to the other dialogue.

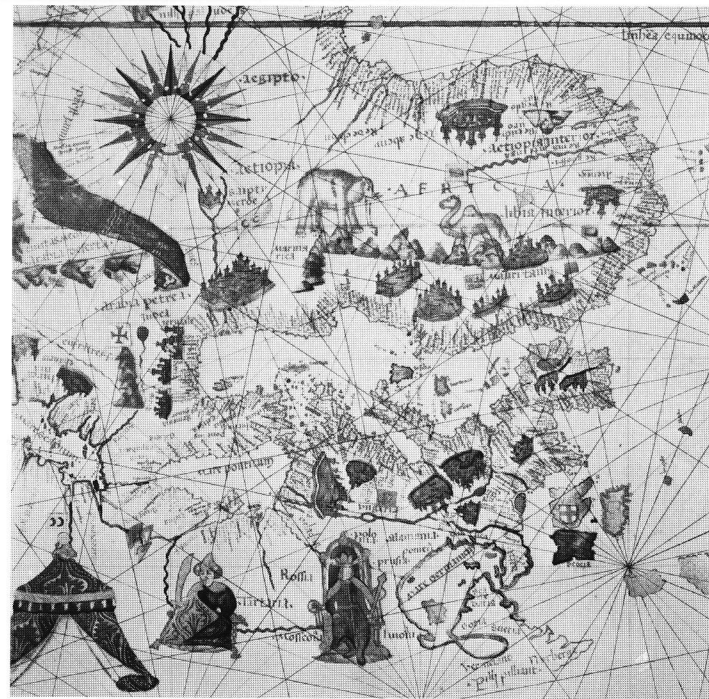
Politics

By its style, this work transgresses, in the name of art, the system of capitalism. The lagoon myth combats the individualistic myth of appropriation. It’s a war of the gods, as in the Greek sky of yore, which seems to be occurring in a museum but is, in fact, occurring in the street. *The Lagoon Cycle* has even taken on the form of street art. Its panels have the allure of walls plastered with ads and graffiti. They evoke the “art contests” of the sixties. They maintain the same quixotic tone of self-involvement and surrealistic humor. Science fiction is mixed with ecology epic. A sort of humor, in turn joking, sarcastic, and vengeful, runs the length of this street of images and text. The dispute circulates in this urban landscape.

But its implications are more than an ironic protest. If *politics* is an arena for managing relationships of force, a theater of operations that makes discussions and thoughtful decisions based on collective interest possible, then we can consider political this art, which offers a series of fields where the problems of the deterioration of living creatures can be



Far left: A map of the Northern Hemisphere, 1595, by Gerardus Mercatur



Left: A map of the world, 1527, by Vicente de Maiollo (courtesy of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan; facsimile in Olin Library, Cornell University)

debated, and which through well-thought-out projects renders a system for survival manageable, discussable, and technically viable. The Harrisons' work introduces technical data to problems that now interest everybody, and it implants in maps and in laboratory calculations street discussions. It thus establishes a political arena. It overcomes, through its utopian projects, the division of labor (on the one hand the serious scientific people, and on the other the artists and the people on the street). That is, it makes possible a collective management of the relationship between human beings and nature.

The Lagoon Cycle is not "professionally" scientific, although it represents detailed scientific research. It also refuses to be categorized as "aesthetic," reserved only for amateurs and leisure time, even though it has been completely conceived as a work of art. It situates itself between the two, in a space that is fundamentally political. "Our work," the Harrisons say, "is a permanent argument with our contemporaries." It takes its interlocutors seriously. It offers them a theater of discussion and models for a project. It creates a "common ground."

It is remarkable in that it escapes a political reasoning that deals only with the relationships of force between human groups. It displaces that kind of politics. It returns to more

primitive relationships, those concerning social balance in a biological environment, and it does so in a way that inscribes the relationship to nature in the network of human communication. That return to nature continues one of art's traditional movements. An investigation that takes a political view of the secrets hidden at the bottom of the lagoon can be an aspect of art. The artists return from the voyage showing us what a politico-artistic form can be.

It is through art that this politics is able to call out indirectly to the interest of the spectators, to their dreams and desires. In the dialogue it institutes, a dialogue whose value is one of democratic debate, the work asks its viewers to be attentive not to what it does but to what they desire. The dialogue introduces each person to his or her dream. It makes us journey to that other place that haunts the certainty of all existence. It opens on the metaphor that makes new inventions of earth possible. The Harrisons' artistic politics has, in the end, only one rule, revealed by the meticulous observation of a primitive form of life: "Pay attention to the flow of belief and the enacting of desire."