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How Big is Here

A Conversation with

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison

BY JANE INGRAM ALLEN

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison were invited to Taiwan earlier this year by the Council for Cultural Affairs. They gave lectures, toured sites, and held discussions with artists, environmentalists, scientists, government officials, and students and participated in a group exhibition at Taipei Artists Village. A collaborative husband and wife team, the Harrisons have been making art dedicated to improving the environment since the late '60s. Their works are in the collections of such institutions as the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Tel Aviv Museum; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. Their installation-based works usually feature components such as maps, charts, and explanatory texts, but they can also include sculptural elements such as the roof gardens of *Endangered Meadows of Europe*. Helen was trained as an educator and psychologist, and Newton as a painter and sculptor, and both were professors in the visual arts department at the University of California, San Diego for many years. Most of their projects, which span continents and genres, have been in Europe and the U.S., but they have also worked in Israel, Australia, and Asia. Their work is included in "Weather Report: Art & Climate Change" at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art through December 21.

Endangered Meadows of Europe, 1996. Top: Original site of the 2-acre roof garden. Bottom: The meadow re-created as a permanent installation in the Rhine River Park, Bonn, Germany.

Jane Ingram Allen: *What you are doing in Taiwan?*

Newton Harrison: We were invited here to think about the global warming problem in relationship to Taiwan. People here asked us what our focus was and what our bottom line was. We don't focus quickly—we scan first and tend to focus much later in the process, and basically, there is no bottom line in our work. The very concept of bottom line is one of the less fortunate delusions operating in Western culture. Another is “time is money.” Between these two, the human race may not last.

Helen Mayer Harrison: Water appears in all of our work in some form. As you know, water is most vital and has astonishing properties. For our projects, we work with people from the community we are in, various officials, and scientists from needed disciplines.

NH: We are also working in collaboration with another artist, David Haley of England, on a project called *Greenhouse Britain*. David is also working here in Taiwan, and we are talking about another possible project, *Greenhouse Taiwan*. However, there are often several years between speaking an idea and finding the energy, the will, and sometimes the love to enact it.

JIA: *When did your interest in global warming begin?*

NH: Our first global warming piece was in 1974. It was intended as an amusing work, since the belief at that time was that we were in an interglacial period, which meant that it could get colder as well as warmer. That is to say, the waters could withdraw or advance. This work, *San Diego is the Center of the World*, proposed long-range planning for either case. It argued, in our first “if this, then that” linguistic format, to begin long- and short-range planning to prepare for either possibility. When Lawrence Alloway reviewed the proposal in our first New York exhibition at Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1974, he observed that we were probably learned, witty nuts from California.

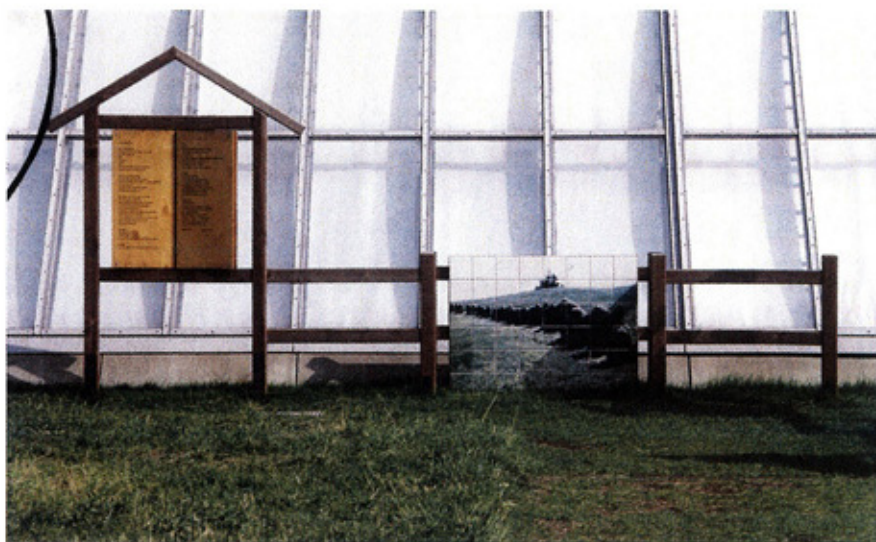
HMH: By 1978, we came to believe that the preponderance of evidence was that global warming, or the greenhouse effect, was indeed inevitable and everything would begin to change. We expressed this idea as the ending of *Lagoon Cycle*. We

began by drawing a map of the world as if the waters had risen. The map was about 7 by 13 feet, and the science at the time said that the waters would rise about 300 feet. So we drew the 300-foot level on a world map as best we could and the outcome was quite amazing. We have done a number of other global warming pieces, often working with knowledgeable scientists. Some deal with the rising waters, some with agricultural lands and urban spaces, and others with effects on the mountains.

NH: Now that global warming has become generally acknowledged and the debate has shifted to address what to do about it, our work picks up on ideas from *Lagoon Cycle* so many years ago. Textual passages in that work asked, “How can we help each other? How can we withdraw?” But also implicit is the question, “How do we defend if the rise is not severe?” We use the term, “graceful withdrawal.” It will be our greatest challenge as human beings to face this. Gore's movie seems to suggest that through carbon control we can minimize the effects of this phenomenon. I think we're past the tipping point.

HMH: While we may be able to minimize some of the more extreme outcomes, there are

Endangered Meadows of Europe, 1996. Below: Meadow structure and story. Bottom: Meadows transplanted and growing as a roof garden.





California Wash, 1996. Three views of project in Santa Monica, CA. Clockwise from above: Overview of the site, 50 x 200 ft. Outfall cover intersection with Santa Monica Promenade, including Surface Mappings and Striations. Wave Fence in plastic-coated steel, 40 x 600 in.

several profound questions that center around how we go about the business of adjusting to change. By we, I'm including all the other life that will be impacted by global warming—plants, animals, birds, and insects whose survival is vital as well. While this phenomenon of climate change has happened many, many times in our past, I don't think it's happened under the conditions of consumption and exploitation of resources and systemic shock that are operating in our "now."

JIA: *Have you worked in Asia? Is Asia different in its approach to environmental problems?*

NH: There are many Asias, some moving toward wealth, some deeply depressed, some environmentally healthy, some environmentally distressed.

HMH: We have been in several Asian countries for short periods. For instance, Sri Lanka in the late '70s was an environmental cornucopia where one might find an afternoon snack by walking down the street in Colombo and picking fruit off of branches. Then I found out that much of the Sri Lankan ecosystem was gone, replaced by exotic species. In large part, this was due to colonialism. When our Sava River piece was shown in Japan and took second prize at the Nagoya Biennale, we spent time with people there who were

attempting to stop a nearby river from being dammed. It was the last undammed river on the island. We failed, of course. They argued that by stopping the building of another dam, we were trying to "break the rice bowl." Also, Newton spent a fair amount of time in Kyoto, doing an artificial Aurora Borealis for the American Pavilion in Expo '70.

NH: It appears to me that the environmental issue only emerged in general Taiwanese awareness during the cleanup of the Xindian and the Tamsui rivers. And this only happened when the polluting businesses moved to China for cheaper labor. We've met a few Taiwanese artists who have deep environmental concerns and are enacting them, and there are some very angry ecologists tracing how global warming is affecting the upward movement of species, but as yet nobody will listen to them, let alone act on what they're discovering.

HMH: We think that Europe has taken the environmental lead globally, and England, Germany, and the Netherlands have taken the lead in research and action.

JIA: *How does this project in Taiwan relate to your past work and present focus?*

NH: Basically, it is all the same work, just enacted differently in different places. However, you're speaking as if we are doing a work here. We have been invited to speak, which we have done. We have not been directly invited to do a work, and in the absence of a clear invitation, with



resources, networking, and a community of interest, a work here will not happen.

HMH: If we were to do a work here, it would, like all of our works, emerge from our whole life experience, which is with rivers and watersheds, social systems, and global warming. Furthermore, it would have core questions embedded in it: What's farming doing to the topsoil? What's over-forestry doing to the rivers and the watersheds? What is the overproduction of sameness doing to the psyche? All of these problems are related to seeing the world as a whole interacting system, which is where we begin.

NH: *The Santa Fe Drain Basin: Lessons from the Genius of Place* is an example of this type of work. We are showing it at the Taipei Artists Village exhibition room in Taipei.

JIA: *What was your most successful project? How do you define a successful project?*

NH: "Is" is the operative verb, not "was." Our collaboration is our most successful project. As to how we define a successful project—you are seeing it and experiencing it right now.

HMH: We're most interested in bringing forth a new state of mind, first in ourselves, then hopefully in others—that is what our work is about. But this is difficult to measure: sometimes it happens slowly and takes a long time. It is not that

The Santa Fe Drain Basin: Lessons from the Genius of Place, 2005. Installation view of project in Santa Fe, NM.

immediate, and results only happen when our work gets physical and lands on the ground. In Terre Haute, in the early '90s, for example, we did a work dealing with the Wabash River, the area where the prairies stopped and the mountains began. We were studying how to preserve and improve the Wabash River, and we made a proposal. Nothing much happened because the head of the art department left and the next director was not interested. However, 15 years later, last month in fact, we got a call from Terre Haute, from people who had been working with us, and we accepted an invitation to put together a group and begin thinking about the eco-political potential for well-being in the watershed as a whole, to continue where we left off.

NH: Basically, we never think about success and failure. The reason for this is not abstract. That is to say, we can never really tell when and how we may have succeeded. In fact, we may not even know what success is. For example, in 1989, we created an exhibition that proposed the purification and regeneration of the Sava River in former Yugoslavia. It was much loved and accepted by the Croatian Water Department. Then the war started, and Milosevic began to attack upward from Serbia toward Croatia. We had to leave, and we thought the work was lost. The ecologist who was working with us stayed, fought for our basic concept, and then, put his own concept in place to save the Drava, the sister river to the Sava. Ultimately, both ideas worked. Now the Sava and the Drava together give the lower Danube about half of its clean water. These two acts, ours and the ecologist's, had a salutary effect on flushing the very polluted Danube estuary as it flows into the Black Sea. We have named this phenomenon of ideas generating ideas "conversational drift." So, we find it best not to worry about success, but to work for the best thing possible in the place and the moment we are in.

HMH: Fundamentally, we have a non-possessive attitude about our work—we make what has been called "art in the public interest," as best as we can define what that interest is in the moment we are in. When our work is presented, it is obvious that its place is in the public domain. People may ask if we have helped Taiwan. If we have, we don't know and won't know for some time, if ever. We know only that we have introduced new ideas about the work of the artist. The results are, as yet, indeterminate.

JIA: *Your work is project oriented, and many times it has no visual product. What do you exhibit?*

NH: Our work is about production, not product, and all of our work envisions. With the Sava River work, we produced an exhibition that was part proposal, part narrative, and part vision of a future. That is to say, could we imagine a new history for the Sava? So, we tend to avoid the term "product." However, *The Endangered Meadows of Europe* is a good example of how a particular work might be called an art object. This was a roof garden, very physical. It operated on about five levels. One of them was about contemplation; another was about a complex story of interdependence; another was about the endangered meadows of Europe, as exemplified by four meadows condensed into one on a roof. Scholars studied the meadow, and it was picked up off the roof and moved to a park in Bonn, then to other parks. The seeds were spread. The project brought the original meadow ecosystem of the area back to Bonn. There were 15 fence-like sculptures with texts and photo images of about 15 meadows, from the south of Italy to Norway, made in ceramic tile. We work with a level of complexity that is sometimes considered difficult. We have no interest in doing a work that gives up its information instantly, or in a couple of sound bytes. Our Santa Monica work does this on a street corner.

JIA: How does your work relate to sculpture and installation art, or conceptual art?

NH: All of our work has a certain sculptural quality about it. We consider our work non-categorical. When a sculptural element is needed, it is there; when a painterly element is needed, it is there. We also use photography, maybe of a dead river or a live meadow. Our work is installation based and shapes the gallery space. The real question is whether the installation has sufficient power embedded in it for the ideas to jump off the gallery walls and land in the real world. Santa Fe would be a good example of one that did, also the Sava River piece.

HMH: As has been endlessly discussed, all good art resonates in the mind—maybe not everyone's mind, but that is an effect we aim for. If you're looking at conceptual art, it might be Eleanor Antin's *Boots on a Postcard*. If you want to be enthralled by an astonishing kind of "seeing" that is about seeing, then you might look at Cézanne's "Mont Ste. Victoire" series.

JIA: How and why do you collaborate?

Greenheart Vision, 1997. Installation view of project in the Jerusalem Chapel, Gouda, Holland.



NH: It is an intellectual choice. When I took on the ecosystem, I did not think I was good enough to do it alone. I asked Helen to join me. A male and a female artist working together gives two different approaches. In the book *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Post-Modernism*, Charles Green goes into this rather deeply and discusses the issues of collaboration.

JIA: Is it difficult? How does the collaboration work?

HMH: It is like a dialogue between two people, an intersecting of stories without naming and claiming. The artist exists in the space between us.

JIA: What is your next project?

NH: We never know. The telephone rings, and we are invited to go somewhere and think. We may make a rather elaborate proposal of two or three intense pages as a beginning.

HMH: It's better if it's only one page. Maybe it will be electric and attract the right interest, and, always, we let it happen, or not, as the case may be.

NH: In any given three-month period, there are many invitations, and we follow them, giving lectures, participating in conferences and symposia, creating dialogues. In 1992, the gallery at Reed College asked us to give a talk. We agreed, and from the airplane, we could see clear-cutting vividly. So we did a work about that; it was the same with Holland. Our work is based in a response to urgencies as they bubble up in any particular now.

HMH: Each piece emerges from a few questions: for instance, how big is here? One of our proposals led us to take up the Peninsula of Europe at the request of the European Union, the German agency of the environment, and the Schweisfurth Stiftung. So you can see, "here" can be a street corner, as in our Santa Monica work, or a sub-continent, or an island like *Greenhouse Britain*, which we are doing on a grant from the British government.

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