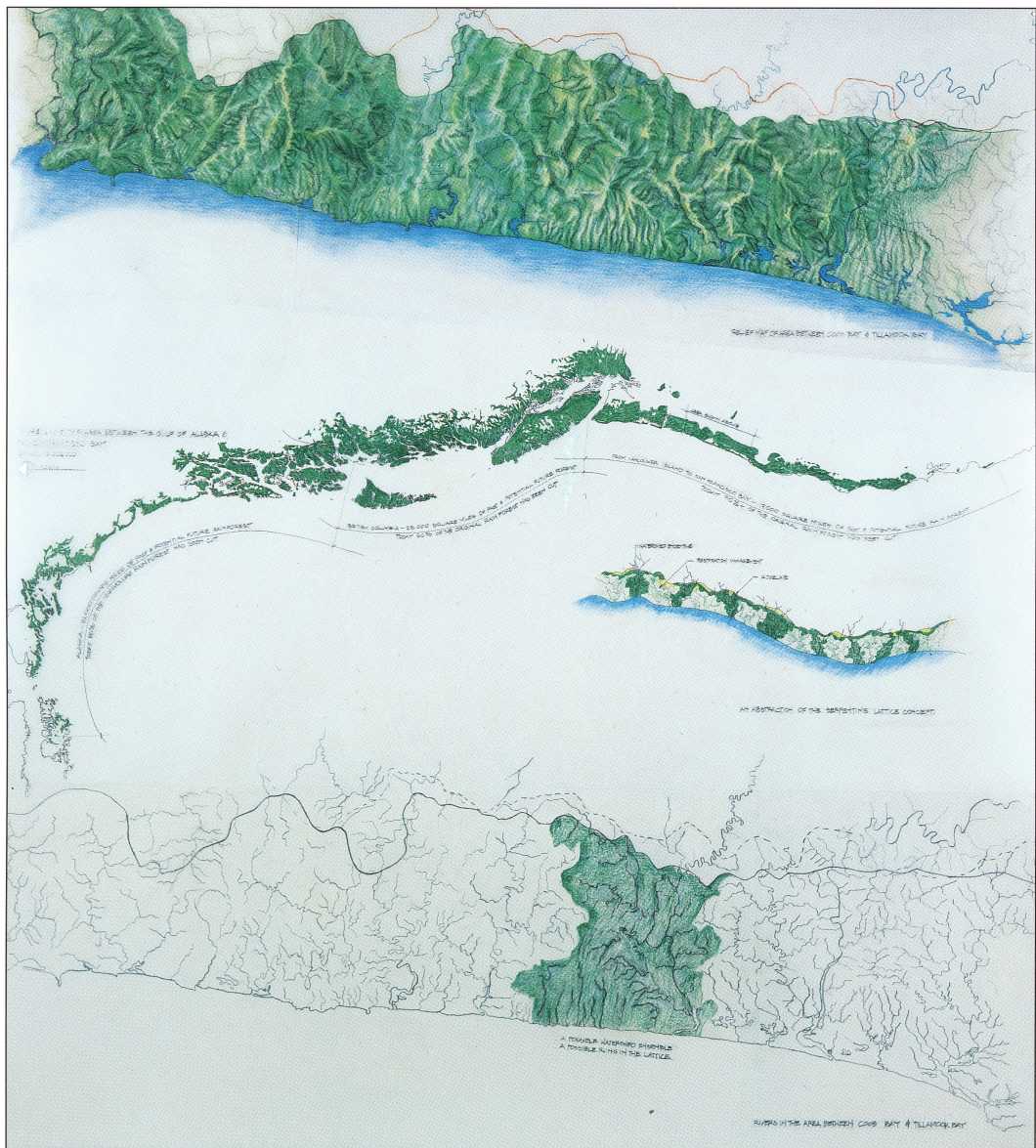


THE SERPENTINE LATTICE



NEWTON HARRISON AND HELEN MAYER HARRISON

THE SERPENTINE LATTICE: WHERE YOU SAID A LATTICE AND I SAID A SERPENTINE AND YOU SAID NETWORK THE WATERSHEDS AND I SAID A GAME OF GO.

BY SUSAN FILLIN-YEH

[The naturalist] looks upon species of animal and plant now living as the individual letters which go to make up one of the volumes of our earth's history; and, as a few lost letters may make a sentence unintelligible, so the extinction of numerous forms of life which the progress of cultivation invariably entails will necessarily render obscure this invaluable record of the past. It is therefore an important object [to preserve them]. . . . If this is not done, future ages will certainly look back upon us as a people so immersed in the pursuit of wealth as to be blind to higher considerations.

—Alfred Russel Wallace, 1863

The control of nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.

—Rachel Carson, 1962

All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.

—Gaston Bachelard, 1964

I. Introduction: *The Serpentine Lattice: Where you said a lattice and I said a serpentine and you said network the watersheds and I said a game of Go.*

Helen Mayer Harrison (hereafter referred to as HMH) and Newton Harrison (hereafter referred to as NH) have chosen to work with unusual artistic materials, the data and the ideas of science, including biology and ecology, land and water use and reclamation, and other kinds of scholarly research. Their visual tools are ensembles of photographs, drawings, slides, models and maps, which, as with all maps, must be understood as the connection of "what is to what could be."¹ Michel de Certeau has written about the maps of the entire globe which the Harrisons made for their twelve-year long project, *The Lagoon Cycle*, "The vision that analyzes is joined with the vision that prophesies. The map. . . . describes an inventable world. . . . The map is sometimes a battleground."² Added to the visual matter of their art are the tools of language and linguistic invention: the artists' dialogues and texts. These, to use words HMH and NH once used about lagoon life, are "tough and very rich."³ They are among the devices the artists have turned to, as they say, to "tune" their use of ecological material to the large "eco-ethical"⁴ questions that confront us all.

The Harrisons are conceptual artists, that is, as artists they have moved away from the production of objects (although they do exhibit proposals and projects in galleries and make actual outdoor works and designs). Their art is realized in ideas which take on compelling visual aspects as installations and as

promenades, land-fill "earth" sculpture, nature corridors, and linkages of all sorts.

But the audience for an installation the Harrisons have made typically must operate without ideological safety nets and in the absence of the familiar boundaries of given disciplines in the sciences or the arts (even though artists and scientists share, after all, the desire to model their solutions after the elegance of nature and its structures). As art historian/critic Craig Adcock has written, their projects "resonate with both the beauty of science and the beauty of nature."⁵ Outsiders, they possess an outsider's raking vision and (over)view from the sidelines (which is also one definition of humor). They work where invited by museum people, city planners, ecologists, or architects, but *only* where invited.

The Harrisons work at *re*-thinking. They seek to identify moments when, as they put it, "the cost of belief has become outrageous,"⁶ in order "to create new spaces, first for the mind thereafter in everyday."⁷ In this sense their art is profoundly and explicitly metaphorical, for metaphors and the various forms of linguistic play enfolded within them operate by opening up linguistic space, and, in their situational aspects, metaphors have the power to open actual spaces (or to redefine existing ones).⁸ In searching out the moments where "reality no longer appears seamless,"⁹ the Harrisons direct us towards that conflictual intersection where things are both the same and not the same, and new ideas come into being.

Their client, they say, is the environment—the land itself,

I am indebted to Ellen Stauder and George Lakoff for information about metaphors. The manuscript was improved by suggestions from Ellen Stauder, Jen Yeh, Heather Diefenderfer, and Silas Cook, and by editorial assistance from the staff of the Reed College News and Publications Office. Conversations with Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison were the essay's lifeblood. Its shortcomings are my own.

¹ Michel de Certeau, "Pay Attention: To Make Art," *The Lagoon Cycle: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison*, Ithaca, New York: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1985, pp. 17-18.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴ Conversation with Newton Harrison, January 23, 1993.

⁵ Craig Adcock, "Conversational Drift: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison," *College Art Journal* 51 no. 2 (Summer 1992): 41.

⁶ Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, as quoted in "Nobody Told Us When To Stop Thinking: An Interview with the Harrisons," a conversation with Thomas W. Sokolowski, *Grey Matters: The Quarterly Bulletin of the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center*, New York University N.S. 1 no. 2 (Spring 1987).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ This essay focuses on metaphor, although the Harrisons' language also takes in other linguistic activity (grouping, clustering, internal rhyming, scale shifts, and synecdochical activity).

⁹ *Ibid.*

and our relations with it. This choice of client resulted from the decision, first articulated in the late sixties, to direct attention to the ecological context of our lives, so as to "deal with survival and allow all the forms we used and all the activities we pursued to spring from that single decision."¹⁰

By "survival," the Harrisons mean ecological survival. One way to speak about what the Harrisons do is to call it "ecological art."

Their themes are the elegance and vulnerability of ecosystems and their interconnectedness; the necessity of protecting our land, air, and water for ourselves and future generations; and the complexity of all ecological matters, since decisions invariably pit human belief structures against natural resources. We begin, the Harrisons say, "when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs."¹¹ One might argue the validity of a recent interviewer's statement that "by operating in the realm of art, the Harrisons can, perhaps, more readily teach us about the ecological dimensions of the human condition than they could if they were working in the domain of science."¹² But the outpouring of new information and the intense activity that tend to be generated whenever the Harrisons set to work seems to prove his point.

They function as eco-activists, whose work has a life beyond its existence as gallery installations or photographs, drawings, or models. As Michael Stepner, assistant planning director for the City of San Diego, has argued, "Their proposals can be viewed as works of art, but they will also be used."¹³ NH comments, "In the context of the art world, our works do, in fact, behave like works of art. When they're exhibited at City Hall, however, they read as workable proposals in poetic form."¹⁴

There is a long tradition in America for art which takes as its subject the interface between ecological systems and social systems, nature and humanity. Contemporary ecological concerns are prefigured in nineteenth-century American landscape paintings, whose viewers read out spiritual or moral exhortations from images of land transformed, particularly in the paintings of Thomas Cole's landscape cycles, as an instance, *The Course of Empire* (1836). That six-painting sequence pictures a river basin built on over the years until, in Cole's predictive vision, the river flows through the stone and concrete pilings of an Imperial Roman city's wharfs and ornate buildings. (The Harrisons once commented ironically on newly constructed concrete river banks in a series of ignored proposals for the city of San Jose, California, in a public letter beginning, "To the Mayor and the City Council: Can it be that you have forgotten what a river is?"¹⁵) In the last painting of Cole's series, the city is in ruins, and wild animals have returned to inhabit it.

But the Harrisons' art grows directly out of the ideals of

the counter-culture history of the 1960s: the first anti-Viet Nam protests and the rebirth of American feminism¹⁶ (women's voices since the 1970s have directed new attention to the environment.)¹⁷ HMH recalls the shock of reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which, based on impeccable and overwhelming scholarly evidence, documented the "irrecoverable"¹⁸ pollution of our oceans, rivers, land, and air. Their years of artistic maturation came at a time when, like many of their contemporaries, they sought to deepen connections between their art and their lives. Both artists had been influenced by the impact of Renaissance mural cycles as large-scale public art and by Bauhaus ideals matching utility with art; NH had apprenticed with Michael Lantz, who in the 1940s made public sculpture for federal buildings in Washington, D. C. And both NH and HMH were moving towards an art in the public interest which questioned everyday reality, seeking to make work that would be, as HMH has put it, "an ethical presence."¹⁹ She recalled those earlier years: "I knew that reality was a social construction, and I didn't like what I saw."²⁰

1960s so-called Technological Art was an arena for early experiments, during a period when blockbuster exhibitions, for example, Pontus Hulten's *The Machine at the End of The Mechanical Age* (1968) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Maurice Tuchman's *Art and Technology* exhibitions of laser art, holograms, kinetic sculpture, and fish ponds at Expo '70 in Japan and at the Los Angeles County Museum, were informing a large public that art might be more than paintings, even abstract ones, displayed on museum walls. NH's lily cell experiments, glow discharge tubes, and brine shrimp ponds evoke the spirit of late 1960s technological art, which annexed science. This is work he has since moved away from, in good part because of the collaboration with HMH, who made clear the "vast and fundamental contradictions embedded in the production of energy expensive environmental works no matter how visually powerful or conceptually loaded—or, how sensitively they are adapted to the environment."²¹

One might also look to 1960s "Earth Art," a movement the Harrisons helped bring into being. Their vision, though, is opposed to the work of some well-known contemporaries, Christo and Michael Heizer among them, who tended to view the land as material which could be wrapped, bulldozed, or otherwise moved around at the artist's will. As with a few other early ecological practitioners, among them Hans Haacke, Mierle Ukeles, and Joseph Beuys, the Harrisons called attention to relationships with nature and threats to its destruction.²² Hans Haacke's project, *Water Boxes* (c. 1965), for example, was designed to be "something that cannot perform without the assistance of its environment,"²³ while Mierle Ukeles' 1969 proposal for the exhibition, "Care," called for daily deliveries to a museum of a garbage truck's contents along with other

¹⁰ Newton Harrison as quoted in Adcock, "Conversational Drift," p. 35.

¹¹ Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, in "Nobody Told Us When To Stop Thinking."

¹² Adcock, "Conversational Drift," p. 41.

¹³ Michael Stepner, as quoted in Robert L. Pincus, "UCSD artists have grand designs for S.D.," *San Diego Union*, sec. E, p. 4.

¹⁴ Conversation with Newton Harrison, November 8, 1992.

¹⁵ *The Guadalupe Meander*, 1982-1983.

¹⁶ In 1962, Helen Mayer Harrison was second director of the Woman's Strike for Peace (the first was Rene d'Harnoncourt; the third, Bella Abzug).

¹⁷ Since the 1960s, the eco-feminist movement has come into being. See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco: Harper, 1980.

¹⁸ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 6 and *passim*.

¹⁹ Conversation with Helen Mayer Harrison, November 8, 1992.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Conversation with Helen Mayer Harrison, January 5, 1993.

²² See Alan Sonfist, ed., *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, New York, E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1982. For a history of recent environmental/ecological art, see Barbara C. Matilksky, *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions*, New York: Rizzoli in association with the Queens Museum, 1992.

²³ Sonfist, *Art in the Land*, p. 113.

containers of refuse, including polluted air and water. As with conceptual artist and Green Movement founder Joseph Beuys, whose *Save the Woods* protest action performances began c. 1971, the Harrisons' concerns were at once visionary and utterly practical. As HMH told an interviewer, "Our concerns with the earth tend to focus on its properties to support life. . . . Our piece in Art Park . . . transform[ed] a 20-acre section of the Art Park spoils pile into a meadow. . . . We are interested in monumentality only as it relates to process."²⁴

Other collaborations beginning in 1970 included *Making Earth* (a demonstration of a compost heap); *The Survival Series*, 1970-73 (experiments with algae and brine shrimp which comprise the simplest discrete eco-system; fish farms; performance pieces with snails and hungry ducks; a portable orchard); and *The Lagoon Cycle*, with its life as a book, as conversations, as performance, and nearly 20 years of exhibition history in installations.

These projects, along with the pivotal and large-scale Sava River proposal (discussed below), which represent two decades of study of watersheds, rivers, and estuaries in this country, in Europe and in Asia, give the context and developmental history for *The Serpentine Lattice*, which grew out of an invitation to visit Portland in May, 1992. *The Serpentine Lattice*, created for the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery and seen here in its first realization as an installation, embodies a pattern of activities: the Harrisons combined scholarly research on Pacific Northwest forests and drain basins with conversations with the region's biologists, ecologists, a former lumberjack, lawyers, economists, and others who "pay attention" (see *Texts*) as the Harrisons say, to the environment. The new piece which is at once a "sketch," a conceptual design, and a planning document, is an over-arching vision for reclaiming the forests of the Pacific Northwest, restoring functioning ecosystems.

Portland and Reed College both are fortunate in having unusually evolved, committed, and diverse communities of environmental activists. Bringing the Harrisons here permits them to operate within a critical mass, while challenging them with the complexities of human beliefs and desires. If Anita Hill has come to symbolize the outrage which may transform exploitative relationships between men and women, who, then, will be the Anita Hill for our relationships with nature, our environment? To which NH and HMH answer, "The problems here are so complex, pervasive and intractable that there may in fact be a need for many Anita Hills."²⁵

II. The Harrisons and Metaphor: Their Ecological Art

In 1983, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison were asked to participate in "At Home," an exhibition at the Long Beach, California, Museum of Art. The work that they chose to contribute to the exhibition was themselves, sitting in chairs flanking a fireplace, and, for a few hours each morning, carrying on a conversation. The piece was an extension of the work they did (and do) every day. It was, as they wrote about it

A working place
in the house which
we have altered minimally but
sufficiently for it to be
living room in the normal sense
after nine a.m.
and a workroom
in the normal sense
before 9 a.m.

You said, if a stranger walked in how
would they know it was not just a living
room with old furniture and a new rug and
two people having coffee.
I said, because a ritual is in progress.²⁶

A funny, down-to-earth question. An answer that invokes ritual. Who said what? And all in the form of a prose poem. HMH's and NH's joint description of an installation that looks like "just" a living room, even though it has been defined as "art," suggests guidelines for the work they have done since the early 1970s. That was the time when both realized that the practical and cognitive artistic tasks with which one artist (HMH) had been "helping" another (NH) had grown to dimensions and urgency which demanded new tactics and solutions, among them the decisions to make a collaborative art ("All nature," they decided, "is a collaborative adventure")²⁷ and to adapt a non-material definition of art ("the most important parts of our work are nonproducts").²⁸ Along with these decisions went flexibility and economy of means ("a working place in a house which we have altered minimally").

Their sensibilities are driven by the pervasive, expansive generosity of humor, and the generative properties of metaphor (for example, as in their vastly expanded vision of "the domestic," suggested by the metaphor, "the earth is our home").²⁹ But, just what is it that the Harrisons can be said to be doing when they do their work? How would one characterize its operations? For one thing, there is compelling language. The Harrisons talk, as a way of encompassing their ecological themes. Conversation has aspects of performance. As with other artists who emerged in the 1960s, they have incorporated performance into their work. However, the artists move beyond performance to an art in which the "give and take" of conversation is an analogue for the very structure of the work produced and the transformations of ideas and information that produced it.

Conversation, for the Harrisons, is, literally, the playing out of metaphor. Their ability to create and utilize metaphors, "guiding metaphors," as they sometimes call them, is basic to the success of their art. As critic Rebecca Solnit wrote in 1990, "the most distinctive—and exhilarating—aspect of their work is the way it acknowledges metaphor and actuality as inseparable,"³⁰ acknowledges, that is, the mutuality of image and process. The Harrisons' involvement with metaphor is as a state of change, transit, or passage, in Aristotelian terms, "two places

²⁴ Michael Auping, *Common Ground: Five Artists in the Florida Landscape*, Sarasota, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1982, pp. 98-99.

²⁵ Conversation with Helen and Newton Harrison, January 23, 1993.

²⁶ Arlene Raven, *Feminism and Art of Social Concern*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988, p. 140.

²⁷ *Lagoon Cycle*, p. 22.

²⁸ Newton Harrison as quoted in *Grey Matters*.

²⁹ I am indebted to George Lakoff's presentation, "Environmental Metaphors: Are there Limits on the Reinvention of Nature?" at the conference, *Reinventing Nature: Ecological Art—Metaphor, Story, and Social Responsibility*, sponsored by the University of California Humanities Research Bureau and the University of California at San Diego, organized by Helen Harrison, November 6-7, 1992. Lakoff's ideas about metaphor intersect with the Harrisons' thinking. See fn. 55.

³⁰ Rebecca Solnit, "Art in its Ecological Context," *Artweek Focus* 21 no. 3 (5 April 1980): 20.

for one sense,³¹ even the state of being “between” (as in their dialogue). In this respect it is true that, as an interviewer once remarked, “Your work seems to generate from dialogue.”³² It is also true in the literal sense as they are constantly in discourse, developing a common mind-set and fund of information.

Their dialogue is Socratic in its shifting viewpoints, owes to Talmudic discourse in its reversals and constant shifts of ground, and even takes on aspects of feminist consciousness-raising as a tactic for enlightenment. It is no accident that there are affinities between the Harrisons’ tactics, which question assumptions about our environment, and feminist theory, which, as Carolyn Heilbrun has written, questions assumptions about women and educates us in the necessity for “new stories” about women: “Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told.”³³ As NH remarks, storytelling allows new ideas to “bubble up.”³⁴

They work by meshing dialogue, metaphor, and storytelling, and have done this since 1973, when they began to ground collaborative dialogue within *The Lagoon Cycle*, actually questioning the construction of reality in their first text as they open the cycle.

I said
What would happen if I told the story just as
it occurred

You said
How could you
Every time we create the past it is different

I said
Then let us reinvent ourselves

You said
We are always doing that anyway

I said
Let’s do it publicly³⁵

Most of the Harrisons’ conversations have to do with telling stories. Theirs are intimate and direct. And as with all really good stories, theirs possess affective power that is grounded simultaneously in personal experience and collective thought. We trust stories, the Harrisons say, because the exchange of stories establishes intimacy. In telling stories back and forth there is common labor, common ground. As HMH has pointed out, “beliefs are enunciated, fixed, or even altered”³⁶ in telling and retelling stories.

Such is the case in *The Lagoon Cycle*, a project realized in numerous installations and published as a book-length catalogue and an artists’ folio book documenting ecological

experiments, research, and travel of ten years’ duration. *The Lagoon Cycle* was decisively shaped by the Harrisons’ own growth (they have referred to the piece as the story of their own becoming). In learning to be collaborative artists they have broken away from the limitations of stereotypic roles of male/female protagonists. As the *Cycle* progresses, the Harrisons move through and shed behavior patterns and the predictable dyads: male/active/Lagoonmaker vs. female/passive/witness. Their joint progress in constant evolution is self-propelling, wonderfully equilibrated, and full of complaints and mistakes, but the mistakes are corrected eventually (“Wait a minute,” says the Witness. “We forgot to pay attention”),³⁷ while the complaints have prophetic dimensions. It is useful to think of the artists’ transformation (“Let’s do it publicly”) as encouragement for remaking our own relationships with nature.

The Lagoon Cycle began with the Harrisons’ discovery in 1972 that the Sri Lankan crab, *Scylla serrata Forskal*, a major but threatened food source throughout the Indo-Pacific region, could be grown in tanks, and flourished in this country in the simplified version of their habitat that the Harrisons developed for them.³⁸ That variants of *The Lagoon Cycle*, including sketches for it and the *Book of the Seven Lagoons*, are still in circulation as major exhibitions in this country and in Europe suggests something of the cycle’s importance and scope. The materials of its seven sections (“lagoons”) include studies of the eco-sociology of Sri Lanka and thoughts on the reestablishment of older village systems, interviews with fishermen, studies of crab aqua-culture in California, a history of the Salton Sea and the death of the corvina, hilarious conversations with businessmen, an account of the production of a tank as a work of art in a patron’s garden, and a grandiose plan to aqua-farm the Salton Sea extended out to the Gulf of California and eventually to the Pacific Ocean, and the discovery of the plan’s flaw: the Gulf of California would be continually polluted and “the ocean becomes a septic tank.”³⁹ The cycle, an encyclopedic cosmography, concludes with an apocalyptic vision of the polar caps melting, the ocean rising, a time when

most crops
known and unknown
would have to grow elsewhere than now
and
most life
known and unknown
will have to go elsewhere than now⁴⁰

The stories of *The Lagoon Cycle* are the Harrisons’ demonstration of the generative power of metaphor, beginning with the First Lagoon (“So I thought/I can make a tank. . . how will a crab know it’s not a lagoon”)⁴¹ and continuing through all seven Lagoons and the increasingly complex discourse of the

³¹ Michael de Certeau, *Lagoon Cycle*, p. 20.

³² Thomas Sokolowski, as quoted in *Grey Matters*.

³³ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988, pp. 11-31.

³⁴ Conversation with Newton Harrison, November 8, 1992.

³⁵ Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Lagoon Cycle*, p. 26.

³⁶ Conversation with Helen Mayer Harrison, January 5, 1993.

³⁷ For examples of paying and not paying attention see *Lagoon Cycle*, pp. 17-23, 76-88.

³⁸ The Sri Lankan ecologist, Ranil Senanayake, brought them the crabs from the lagoons as Upouvali and Ngumbo.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Lagoonmaker and the Witness [italics below], NH's and HMH's alter-egos.

But
the tank is part of an experiment
and the experiment is a metaphor for a lagoon
if the metaphor works
the experiment will succeed. . . .
Remember
a metaphor can be a powerful instrument
if we believe it
if we enact it
it will develop a life of its own. . . .
but it's only a tank
The crabs don't know its only a tank
yet when we feed them they look up
*so already they behave differently*⁴²

Some metaphors in *The Lagoon Cycle* are geographic: we notice that the lagoon in Sri Lanka has its equivalents in a tank in San Diego, in the Salton Sea, even in the Pacific Ocean. Other metaphors are embodied in the Harrisons' invented maps (as seen above) and in the dynamics of the cycle's two main forms of representation, texts and images. Even the mystery of *The Lagoon Cycle's* crabs' behavior is solved by resorting to metaphor.

They sat with folded claws
The image was of depression of the absence of well-being
The metaphor of absence was compelling We began to
search for what could be missing . . . we improvised a
*monsoon as best we could with fresh water from a hose*⁴³

Lagoons themselves are powerful metaphors, with reverberations throughout the Harrisons' work, described first in conversations with a fisherman living on the lagoon at Upouveli, a man who, "answered/questions as best he could after finding out we didn't want to buy crabs."⁴⁴ An estuarial lagoon is the place where fresh and salt waters meet and mix. Since its waters do not have the constancy of either ocean or river water, a lagoon's existence is always at risk, and in this sense, lagoons are symbolic of the fragility of all ecosystems where "anything may go wrong."⁴⁵ Yet lagoons have evolved "high tolerance to the stresses that come about from sudden changes in salt and fresh water and/temperature and available food for the life web."⁴⁶ Thus, lagoons are symbols of hope for regeneration—in a lagoon, "improvisation remains constant"⁴⁷—if only because the environment worldwide has been so destroyed. As the Slovenian scientist, Istak Geister, who brought NH to visit the source of the severely threatened Sava river told him,

nature exists in secret places and invisible spaces
and will find ways to co-exist.⁴⁸

Not only lagoons are regions of hope. The Harrisons have recognized regions along the Sava River in former Yugoslavia which are "sanctuaries" of sorts. Invited by German ecologists Harmut Ern and Martin Schneider to help develop a nature preserve in part of the flood plain of the Sava River southwest of Zagreb, the Harrisons discovered a place where, as a local ornithologist told them

there are large fishponds
and although it was not intended
these ponds have become sanctuaries
offering habitat to migrating waterfowl
and more permanent residence
to herons, cormorants, and the sea eagle

You said
if the ponds are filled then drained
every year they must behave somewhat like a
floodplain
from an ecological point of view

He said
somewhat⁴⁹

A Breathing Space for the Sava River (Atempause for den Sava Fluss) describes the possibilities for these "sanctuaries" as they occur. A fish farm that behaves like a flood plain functionally (and metaphorically) becomes one for the Harrisons. It functions as a "niche," a position in a habitat adapted by new organisms, whose position there may be tenuous. The leading metaphor of the Sava River piece, however, enlarges the metaphor of sanctuaries/niches, transforming it into a metaphor of interdependencies which form a corridor that runs the length of the river. In Zagreb, where the Harrisons exhibited their plan for an island they had been asked to redesign as a nature preserve, the Harrisons pointed out that it was not possible to rescue the island without preserving the river in which it was located. Their proposal, supported by the Croatian bureaucracy and eventually offered funding by the World Bank but thereafter brought to a complete standstill by the war between Serbia and Croatia, was to create a nature corridor for the entire run of the Sava River from its twin sources down to the Danube.

The history of the Sava River project is an example of what the Harrisons mean when they use the term "conversational drift." Although the World Bank initially agreed to support the Harrisons' nature corridor project, including purification of the Sava (presumably at the behest of the Croatian Water Department, who had not named the Harrisons as authors), a year later the project was apparently dropped. Conversation, as they say, had drifted away from them. Several months thereafter, the Director of the Croatian Zoological Society asked the Harrisons

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61 and conversation with Helen Mayer Harrison, January 5, 1993.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Newton Harrison and Helen Mayer Harrison, *Breathing Space for the Sava River*, Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein with the Berliner Artists' Program of the DAAD, 1990, n.p. The text is reprinted as "Breathing Space for the Sava River," in *International Synergy Journal* 5 no. 2 (Fall, 1990): 42-59, and page citations are from *International Synergy Journal*. Geister, p. 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

to restate the proposal at the Society's yearly meeting. Restatement was necessary because the World Bank had at first only been interested in water purification and had not grasped the larger issue of the ecological connectedness of the entire watershed. The conversation drifted back to the Harrisons. But the day before the conference, war broke out. Very quickly the conversation turned violent and drifted away again.⁵⁰

Any progress that was made, though, was made through storytelling. As NH once described it

When we get up to tell stories to the Croatian Water Department, the storytelling is what causes the conversation to drift. After we've told our stories, those government officials see our images differently. The conversation drifts and in this context the idea of purifying the whole [Sava] river seems more real and less difficult.⁵¹

But if, as the Croatian story suggests, storytelling made "the idea of purifying the whole river . . . less difficult," it is because of the other metaphors inscribed in the Harrisons' stories, and the ways in which they clarify assumptions about power relationships.⁵²

Even a simple list moves towards new thought. A holistic yet stringent view which holds that a river is a corridor invokes the sum of threats to the river's existence. The Sava River is

a river
moving from mountain sources. . . .
You said. . . .
it could be any river. . . .
Yet we know . . . that a new story. . . .
is being written for this river. . . .
A coal mine and black water. . . .
An atomic energy plant and heated water. . . .
A fertilizer factory and acid water⁵³

The corridor metaphor is generative, bringing other metaphors into being. For example, in the Harrisons' vision, the Sava is an information processor, dealing variously with mechanical, biological and chemical data.

The river is asked to process new information. . . .
when it hits the alluvial floodplain
and the information is mechanical.
A new shape has been constructed for the river

by the construction of levees and dams
so that the river is permitted to rise and fall
but not to spread. . . .
For the river it is the shape of catastrophe.

The river is asked to process new information
when it hits the alluvial floodplain
and the information is biological.
A state of change has been created for the river
by the disappearance of life that once pervaded it. . . .
For the river it is the shape of catastrophe.

The river is asked to process new information
when it hits the alluvial floodplain
and the information is chemical
and the information is toxic⁵⁴

The Sava River is active and intelligent. In fact, the Harrisons characterize it in a certain sense as a life form, an image most common perhaps in poetry, which, as a mode of thinking, permits such departures. But, as linguist George Lakoff has pointed out, our metaphors reveal our intentions.⁵⁵ It may not be possible for humanity to heal the environment until we are able to think of the natural world in some way as living and sentient, like ourselves, or, if this is too great a step, at least, in Lakoff's words, as "a whole of which we are inseparable parts."⁵⁶ The trick is to change the metaphor, and one way to do that, as the Harrisons describe their activities, is to "change the conversation."⁵⁷

Their tactics tend to generate clusters of activity, bringing together artists, biologists, city planners, politicians and ecologists and others; the 1986 Devil's Gate Proposal, a forty-million-dollar restoration design adopted by the city of Pasadena, brought together the city government and water department, a citizens' group, Pasadena 2000, the Pasadena Art Alliance, and the Santa Monica Nature Conservancy. Achieving the city government's official go-ahead for the project took approximately five years. *The Serpentine Lattice* (see below) brought together Pacific Northwest university people including biologists, ecologists, environmentalists, and art historians. Certainly one answer to the question of why, in our times, the Harrisons' work looks the way it does, is to point out that they have chosen to make art in which many voices speak. Much of our work, HMM once reminded an interviewer, "has no signature. . . . In fact the larger the idea, the greater the anonymity."⁵⁸ As NH has pointed out, "Often it comes back to us: 'But the Harrisons don't really do anything.' Well, the way you know we did something is to subtract us. If you subtract us

⁵⁰ Conversation with Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, January 5, 1993.

⁵¹ Newton Harrison, as quoted in Adcock, "Conversational Drift," p. 39.

⁵² The Harrisons were told that it was their unique narrative which won them second prize for the Sava work in the 1991 Nagoya Biennale.

⁵³ *IS Journal*, p. 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. See also fn. 29.

⁵⁶ See fn. 29.

⁵⁷ Adcock, "Conversational Drift," p. 41 and fn. 24.

⁵⁸ *Grey Matters*.

from Atlanta, maybe there would be more buildings going up surrounded by parking lots topped with barbed wire. If you subtract us from Pasadena, Devil's Gate debris basin does not become a refuge. If you subtract us from Baltimore, the Harbor remains disconnected from the inner city."⁵⁹

The more room for more voices, and, as the Harrisons say, the more complex and layered the ecological discourse, the greater the chance for survival.

III. *The Serpentine Lattice*: Where you said a lattice and I said a serpentine and you said network the watersheds and I said a game of Go ⁶⁰

The slides, texts, and maps of *The Serpentine Lattice* first took shape as a dialogue in June of 1992, shortly after HMH and NH first walked through forest land near Forest Park and Oxbow Park, Oregon, flew in a small plane over the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers, the northern Oregon Coast Range and the Nehalem River basin, and began to engage in conversations with "anyone who would listen and anyone who would teach us or tell us stories or answer questions."⁶¹ From its beginnings, the dialogue had multiple voices: "you," "I," and "somebody," as well as protagonists who worry that "you can't do this because of that." These voices in turn, as the Harrisons structure it, evoke "everybody" (e.g., everyone "who thinks of these things"). We are all in it together.

The Harrisons' dialogue proceeds by putting into words new interpretations disguised as old, already known information (re-inventing and talking about it, the essence of the Harrisons' thinking): "Everybody knows there's less than 10% of the old growth left/ And everybody knows a tree farm is not a forest." Elsewhere, questions which restate conventional conversational gambits suggest new ways of thinking, for example, "Thinking/about a new history," a phrase which, seemingly, moves us into the future looking back at past decisions. Invoking hindsight, a vision of change as already having occurred, perhaps makes it easier to think about those new decisions we will need to make. This notion echoes through many of the Harrisons' texts. It is their way of saying that all existence is in interaction, all activity has consequence. The Harrisons play with words to reveal the structure behind the platitudes. For example, their question, "Who can seriously value . . . [the rainforest's] total destruction?" reverses expected language, "Who values preservation of forests?" The reversal calls attention to the "value" (to some) in "destruction." Who benefits?

Other shifting is visual. Consider the Harrisons' metaphors for proposed patterns of land reclamation in an activist poetics. They choose "lattice," for example, and not the related but more rigid "grid," for, with its implications of support for growth (a vine), a "lattice" also functions with a necessary and responsive

ad hoc irregularity and flexibility. Further, as visual metaphors, both "lattice" and "serpentine" appear to generate motion. Both can change direction, and, as NH puts it, they even "wiggle."⁶²

Characterizing the lattice and serpentine as visual entities has additional implications, for both these forms are always comprehended within a field as figure/ground relationships, particularly if, as on a map (see below), the serpentine lattice form becomes dense. By all accounts, our minds and eyes tend to work together to create such patterns. But the possibility always exists for reversing figure and ground, a visual metaphor of transformation. Re-interpretation by the Harrisons' ecologically educated eyes, that is, reversing the ground, questions the place of humanity within our environment. Perhaps land settlement (figure) needs to be fitted around ecological needs and systems (ground), instead of the reverse. Literally changing place, the lattice looks forward to a time when there might be limits to settlement. As HMH and NH describe it, "an amazing thing happens. The lattice form becomes ground. The spaces within become figure. The implications from the perspective of land planning and restitution ecology are formidable."⁶³

Thus, *The Serpentine Lattice* installation returns to us a vision that we have lost or tend to overlook: that the region's forests between the summit of the coast range and the Pacific ocean, from California to Alaska, once were linked in a north/south continuity, and linked again by the thousands of rivers and estuaries they flank in watersheds and drainage basins running to the sea. Roughly bounded on the west by the ocean and on the east by the ridge line, the forests of the Pacific Northwest coast ranges make up an ecological entity, a vision which for HMH and NH by no means excludes hard questions about lumber interests, cash flow, and jobs. The forests cross state lines and national borders, directing attention to the arbitrary nature of lines on maps (and to the fact that national maps tend to go blank on the other side of national borders).

They engage in a form of eco-politics, for they invite the viewer to re-imagine, to reinvent, to see regions first as bio-regions rather than as political constructs. (The Harrisons have been involved with these issues since the mid-1970s when, in *Meditation on the Great Lakes of North America*, they proposed that, in order to clean up the Great Lakes, the citizens of the Great Lakes watershed secede from the United States and Canada to form a new, ecologically conscious nation.)⁶⁴

They planned *The Serpentine Lattice* in three interlocked parts: a 36-foot map which frames their vision for reclamation and restoration of the forests of the Pacific coastal rainforest from California up through Canada to Alaska, texts which speak about how this might be accomplished, and an eight-foot-by-thirty-six foot photomural, which is a projected loop of some 300 slides, the images of actual places represented on the map.⁶⁵

⁵⁹Conversation with Newton Harrison, January 5, 1993. For a discussion of the metaphorical structure of urban spaces, see *Grey Matters*.

⁶⁰"When we use the term, a game of Go," the Harrisons say, "it informs the metaphor of *The Serpentine Lattice* because it refers to the situation where one side is in a state of unity and the other, in a state of fragmentation. We propose that it is a healthier state for human activity to be fragmented in an all over ecological field, than for the ecology to be remnants within a field of human activity. The issue is one of continuing restitution." Conversation, January 24, 1993.

⁶¹Conversations with Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, January 5 and January 24, 1993.

⁶²Conversations with Newton Harrison, December 10-15, 1992.

⁶³Conversations with Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, January 23, 1993.

⁶⁴They were invited to make a proposal by Michel Benamou of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

⁶⁵The majority of the slides come from Professor Trygve Steen, co-producer with the Harrisons of the photo-mural. Professor Steen's growing archive of more than 20,000 aerial images of Pacific Northwest forest land is an invaluable research tool; the Alaskan photographs were taken by R.G. Ketchum (see *Acknowledgements*).

The installation intertwines vision and metaphor. NH began with the map, matched together from over 80 United States Department of Interior Geological Survey maps and Canadian Energy, Mines and Resources agency maps (no single map is available at this scale).⁶⁶ The map has been both de-mapped and re-mapped. The viewer who moves in close to scrutinize its details realizes that its makers have chosen to suspend it beneath a vellum scrim which nearly conceals all geographical information, including place and river names and state and national boundaries. But if the vellum subtracts, it adds as well. Drawn on it is an approximation of the reaches of the coastal temperate rainforest as current research suggests it may have been before logging, and the more than 3,800 rivers that flow through it.⁶⁷ The result, a map which hangs emerald and watery in darkened gallery space, is a vision of the Pacific Northwest looking almost the way it might if seen from space in a science fiction film featuring special effects. As with many maps, our view is dual: we seem to hover above it while we also track through it in the mind's eye, our feet or fingers tracing lines, colors, the shapes of forest boundaries, ridgelines, watershed ensembles, and rivers.

Maps are concrete and yet abstract, nets thrown around the real. This map is no exception, for what it depicts in all its beauty and abundance is loss: its greens are those of forest that does not exist, forest that has been cut down, forest that that may not ever grow back. At the same time, though, the map's drawn green continuities are a swathe, suggesting that we consider what might be, for it offers us possible ways to think about future growth. The map suggests that we consider trying not only to preserve the approximately seven percent of old growth forest still left to us, but also what it might be like to reclaim the other 93 percent which has been clear-cut, often twice, although some of the clear-cut still retains the potential to become healthy new successional forest.

The key to the map is a drawing, *The Serpentine Lattice*, which realizes the Harrisons' visual metaphor for forest reclamation: the concept of the "serpentine," seen in the segment where dark and light green markings evolve from and resolve back into the image of a snake's body and even of some species' patternings. If read off the map, the pattern springs to life as a connective "lattice," a tissue of watershed ensembles from Alaska down to California, some encompassing drain basins which run from coastal estuaries up into the mountains, and others occurring at higher elevations near the coast range ridge line, but all of them continuities in which can be found old growth, succession forest—and clear-cut acreage. Watershed ensembles are the modules of future forest ecosystems. They offer models for future restoration. Imagine clear-cut land brought back into the public domain, protected, and left to grow back for 50 years.

As with the map, the photomural also limns a metaphor; as the Harrisons describe it, "it is a time-line, a continuous fade-out of the original rainforest." The slides represent the creation

of a desert, for the story the photomural tells in a seven-minute loop of images is one of movement towards destruction. Over and over, in vignettes which take the viewer north from California's redwoods to the cedar, fir and spruce and hemlock forests of Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and Alaska, we see images of flourishing old growth give way to intermittent clear-cut, then massive clear-cut, then stumps. "The same format, moving from a fragment of old growth to clear-cut to stump to dead stream," HMH and NH write, "occurs again and again."⁶⁸ Images of destroyed trees and clear-cuts which look like charnel fields eventually take over the screens. The film loop represents the destruction of an ecosystem, as the Harrisons put it, "an appalling tale of ecological violation."⁶⁹ The slides the Harrisons have brought together for us to consider warn that without "a new history," without "changed conversation," forests could become only a memory.

But what if the projectors were to be run in reverse? We would have a new metaphor, a vision of an evolving ecosystem described in images of regeneration and growth. Reversing the projectors suggests what it might look like to "reverse the ground" of settlement (see *Texts*). Then the images we see on the screens would return us to the great green gesture of the map, with its contours describing "an emerging ecological field" and suggesting ways to reorganize national and international priorities.

The installation's darkness yields up other meanings. Certainly we are reminded of the darkness within a forest, or perhaps what the Harrisons have created is a brain which hangs in the skull in darkness. A disembodied intelligence peers out to see a map, a drawing, and arrays of slides projected on an adjacent walls. Elsewhere slides flash texts (see *Texts*) which position some of the knowledge which has been amassed about forests, noting it both in its precision and in its uncertainties: "It is not known/how much of the original coastal temperate rainforest/is now a tree farm." The eyes come to rest on printed scrolls which give accounts of dialogues with ecologists and a former logger.

But the flavor of the installation is too quirky for disembodied intelligence. The texts are wry and personal: "It is known," the Harrisons say, "that the only animals that choose to live in board feet/are humans/and termites." And the room is full of small technological noises: the fans and the dry clacking of the slide projectors. It is tempting to supply the imagined sounds of the Harrisons' voices reading aloud in turn the texts we read to ourselves. Perhaps they will add their voices to future versions of *The Serpentine Lattice*. But as it is now, the many kinds of information in the installation function as different voices. It is no accident that work on it brought a micro-community into existence, whose informed commitment to the issues enabled the work.⁷⁰

Susan Fillin-Yeh
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⁶⁶ The Harrisons and this author are pleased to acknowledge Conservation International and Ecotrust for providing us with research documents and the map, *Original Distribution of Coastal Temperate Rain Forests of North America*, which we have modified for *The Serpentine Lattice*.

⁶⁷ The Harrisons and this author gratefully acknowledge the research of ecologists and other scientists, some of whose work is cited in the ecological bibliographies below, and the guidance of project ecologist Heather Diefenderfer.

⁶⁸ Letter from Helen and Newton Harrison, February 21, 1993.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* The Harrisons suggest some parallels between *The Serpentine Lattice* and their *Trummerflora* memorial to Gestapo victims, transferring certain visions: "something awful has happened here."

⁷⁰ The reader is referred to the *Acknowledgements*.