


the third hand



COLLABORATION IN ART
FROM CONCEPTUALISM
TO POSTMODERNISM



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Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Green Heart Vision* (1995). Overall installation view of proposal prepared for the Cultural Council of Southern Holland and the Province of South Holland, proposing an ecological corridor, 1–2 kilometers wide, separating urban from agricultural areas in the Randstad.

5. Memory and Ethics: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison

The Client Is the Environment

Memory can be contained within images, and chapters 1–4 have revolved around descriptions of how artists emerging from the context of a highly antivisual conceptualism grappled with images, not words, in order to construct memory systems while at the same time admitting the ruinous relationship of intention to unconstrained textuality. Intention, signification, and memory had clearly become problematic concepts. To be sure, memory's significations in art were often vague and even willfully obscure, as critics noted even in the early 1970s. My discussion, however, is not a critique of theories of memory as such. It is a description of the way memory in art was constructed—or, more accurately, of the way artists made attempts to organize memory substitutes according to more precise systems and intentions than simply those of nostalgia. Iconology and mnemonic systems were but two possible, though almost certainly inadequate, models for the representation, structuring, and regulation of memory in visual texts.¹ For all this, the question remains: Does such unexpected precision, framed by new types of artistic identity, simply offer the same old meanings? That is the underlying question in this chapter's analysis of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's environmental art.

According to memory theorist Mary Carruthers, pre-Renaissance readers valued memory much more highly than its opposite, imagination; the reverse has by and large been the case since the nineteenth century. The working method of collaboration has convenient if superficial affinities with memory, for the fact of artistic collaboration implies an ideological downplaying of the role of imagination as it is usually conceived: as the expression of individual subjectivity. Memory, on the other hand, makes things relative: It gives perspective and has therefore sometimes been considered ethical in itself because it relativizes the individual, self-centered subjectivity that is a poor guide

to how to act. According to medieval theologians, the commemorative process transpiring from the act of reading is ethical because reading a book is a process resembling a meeting of minds, a way of making others present, and therefore reaches beyond the confines of an egoistic “I.”² It is not mechanical or transparent. By default, the artistic collaborations discussed in chapters 3–5 tended to reprioritize both critical memory and historical memory. By no coincidence, all of these artists saw their collaborations and their art in highly ethical terms. They felt that memory needed to be preserved precisely because in a society in need of ethics, in need of a guide to how to act in the world—especially with regard to the fragile environment—memory would be ethical. An ethical art, however, would have to be constructed without descending into anachronistic romanticism (as the Boyles so accurately understood) and without forgetting the lessons of conceptual art. The theatrical and historicist language of Boyle Family and Anne and Patrick Poirier was interwoven with a desire for an ethical postconceptualist art, and this was also true for Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison.

For the Harrisons, conceptual art consisted of a “conversation between artist and audience, using different signs.”³ They had been always concerned with ethical, environmental, and moral issues, and conceptual art seemed to them to privilege nothing except art: They found its cerebral, disinterested mental abstraction completely insufficient. The Harrisons’ installations, books, and sites represent the uncanny surfacing of something repressed but present in minimal and conceptual art: ethics. Ethics had been potential but not manifest in earlier minimalism. They were implied in the framing discourses of Donald Judd’s highly moralistic art criticism and later in the austere rigors of his site-specific self-curating at Marfa, Texas, and they were equally clear in Carl Andre’s participation in the antiwar and Art Workers’ Coalition movements.⁴ Minimalist artists, however, did not wish to bluntly spell out in their work their awareness that art is not disinterested; the Harrisons did. They understood that art is implicated in the movements of power, and the texts in their works reflect on their place in this exchange. According to the Harrisons, their client was not a museum, corporation, or public authority. Instead, Helen Mayer Harrison observed, “The client is the environment.” Their own relation to money was that they made “art in the public interest” in a situation where “the metaphors and values once given to ecology are now given to the marketplace.” They charged fees for their commissions: “Ethics mean we have to get paid.” Their fees were negotiated according to each project, and they strictly avoided all speculative investments, even though their projects sometimes had considerable impact on real estate values. For example, their proposal for massive land rezoning affected land values in the region bordering on their Dutch *Green Heart Vision* project (1995).

A Single Decision Generates a Life’s Work

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison began their artistic collaboration in 1971. They intended this as a lifetime artistic decision, but it was not an abrupt decision, for

Helen Mayer Harrison had assisted Newton Harrison with his previous, systems-based installations, and according to Newton Harrison, they had been cooperating on projects for several years. Both were heavily involved in the peace movement, and they subsequently worked together at the Peace Center in Greenwich Village, and at David Dellinger's Living Center in New Jersey. Helen Harrison also worked as the New York coordinator of the Women's Strike for Peace in the early 1960s. Newton Harrison recalled that in 1969 they jointly constructed a world map of endangered species. At that point, although they continually consulted each other about Newton's works and about contemporary art in general, they maintained separate careers, Newton as an artist, Helen as a sociologist.

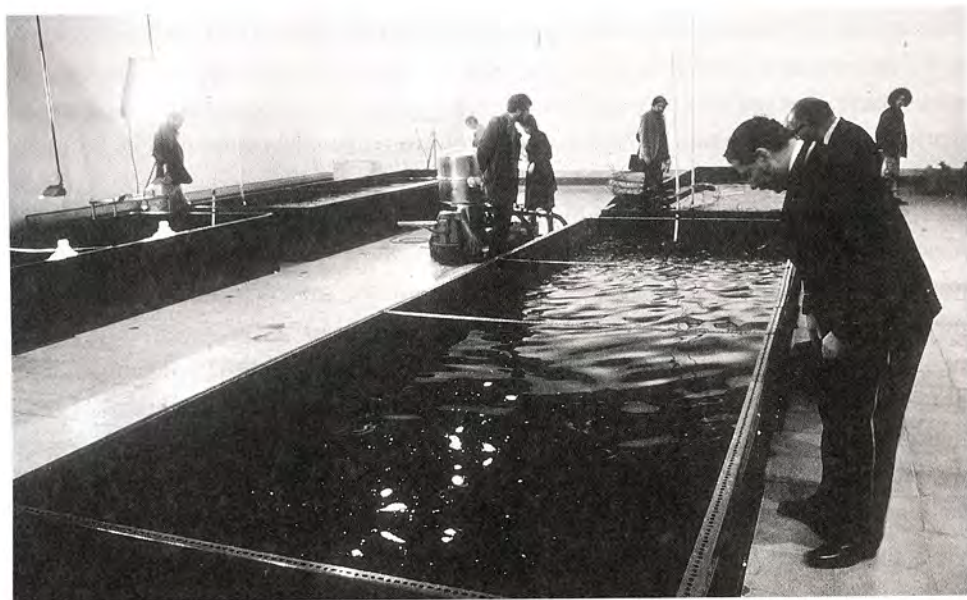
For all their previous cooperation, they were both aware that the decision to collaborate artistically was a "frame" separating the new work from their previous activities and that the distinguishing force of the frame was based on a conceptual decision or act: "Part of the discourse of that period was the idea that a single decision could generate a life's work. So we asked ourselves, 'What would be a nontrivial single decision?'"⁵ Their decision to abandon separate careers was prompted when Helen Harrison was fast-tracked for a prospective vice-chancellorship at the University of California. She felt she could work toward the radical social change she wished for more readily by collaborating with Newton as an artist than through the slow, incremental bureaucracy of the University of California system, where they had both been faculty members since 1967. So, according to Newton Harrison, "In a sense, Helen became an artist and I became a researcher, in the process of teaching each other to be the other party."⁶ They recall that the reaction from other artists, including those involved in performance, installation, and conceptual art, was extraordinarily negative. Most assumed that Helen Harrison would disappear, subsumed by male ego (an assumption that we also saw surface in connection with Boyle Family): "Eleanor Antin said 'How can you let Newton take you over?' People got used to it. By 1976, no one was worried."

From the start, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison worked on an epic scale. Employing fieldwork techniques from sociology, such as interviews and community consultations, they gathered vast amounts of information about environmentally threatened sites. From this research, they made large series of collages, photomurals, and books, combining enlargements of aerial photographs, maps, and illustrative drawings with evocative texts, captions, and detailed descriptions of ecological strategies that were designed to heal degraded or damaged regions. The effect was poetic but unambiguously practical, for they were suggesting concrete, socially viable environmental strategies. They complicated this straightforward and increasingly pedagogical aim in two ways. Both require that we take account of artistic collaboration.

First, the Harrisons were effectively engaged in the creation of a surrogate body composed of combinations of texts, poetry, manifestos, and installations. All this was framed by the fact of the Harrisons' artistic collaboration in which, as well as working

with each other, they subcontracted tasks to short-term and long-term team members, rather like the directors of a small, highly specialized, and highly respected consultancy business. Their letterhead read: “The Harrison Studio, Helen Mayer Harrison, Newton Harrison & Associates.” At different times their children worked with them, just as Sebastian and Georgia Boyle worked with their parents. The Harrisons employed the same core team of researchers over several projects: Vera Westergaad and Gabriel Harrison.

In effect, they constructed a collaborative entity composed of many people, and they used media like photocopiers, computers, drafting machines, and even, in early works such as *Portable Fish Farm: Survival Piece #3* (1971), living animals such as catfish, brine shrimp, and lobsters instead of paint and paper. In their projects, the Harrisons constructed complex feasibility studies, sending out “vision statements” and poetic manifestos through project submissions, environmental impact statements, press releases, and the mail. In other words, the Harrisons’ artistic identity was constructed through the traces of projects—which often did not exist at all except through letterheaded correspondence, exhibition documentation, artists’ books, architectural plans, and mappings of projected futures. They were effectively working as environmental consultants, although they still exhibited in art galleries and museums, for they were involved in real projects to effect environmental change. They worked, in their own words, in a zone between art, landscape design, and architecture. Other artists of their generation moved toward this area for similar reasons: From the 1980s onward, for example, Vito Acconci—previously known for his confrontational solo actions—



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Portable Fish Farm: Survival Piece #3* (1971). Installation view, six rubber-lined tanks, 96 inches x 240 inches x 36 inches, containing catfish, brine shrimp, and lobster ecosystem. Catfish electrocuted at exhibition opening for ritual feast, exhibited in *Eleven Los Angeles Artists*, Hayward Gallery, London (1971).

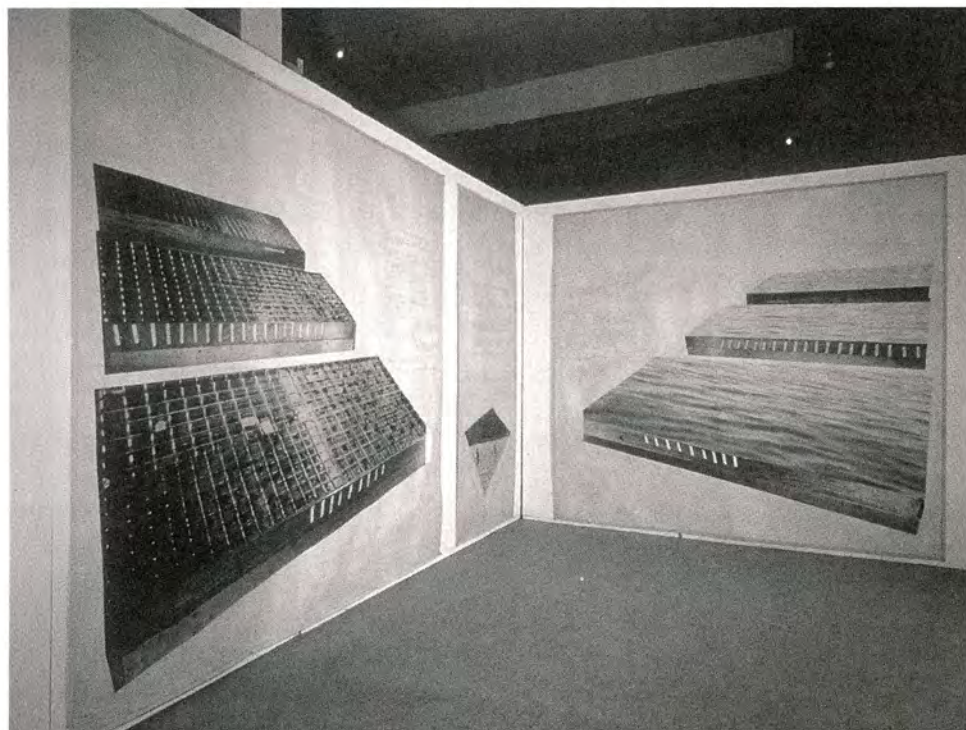
worked with his own team of landscape architects. The Harrisons' studio statement and artists' book for a later project, *Green Heart Vision* (1995), emphasized the importance they attached to imagining and defining their iconic concepts through teamwork, so both the issues they addressed and their own speaking positions (physical, geographic, and ethical) were constantly described, monitored, and acknowledged:

Finally
the Green Heart
cannot continue to be itself
until
and unless
its borders
are defined.⁷

The same artists' book contains a description of their working process: The initial phase of collaboration was completely private—just the artists and their core team—permitting a free allocation of working roles and generation of ideas; after a period of intensive research, mental overload, and information gathering, they produced a “conceptual vision,” and only then did they commission external participation.⁸ At this point they contacted professionals and planners to assist in the execution of the conceptual design. Maarten van Wesemael mentions several working concepts that the Harrisons associated with the process of artistic collaboration, including “conversation” and “drift.” (These terms will be clarified later in this chapter.)

The process of diffused authorship, here necessarily accompanied by conferences, media events, and intense discussion with ever-expanding circles of people, was also accompanied by a movement beyond the studio—toward research carried out on site in locations as diverse as the Sacramento River delta, California; Kassel, Germany; Pasadena, California; and Ljubljana, Slovenia. Such fieldwork lay beyond the psychically lonely location within which artistic authenticity had traditionally been framed and certified: the artist's studio. Caroline Jones has analyzed the use of industrial models of production and location by postwar American artists, and her conclusion tallies with the evidence of this book so far: that the changing nature of the “machine in the studio” (her phrase) was accompanied by shifts in authorial identities, away from the individual, studio-based artist toward art made outside any conventional studio or configuration of artistic workers, noting in the process the phenomenon of collaborative teams such as Anne and Patrick Poirier, Komar and Melamid, or Gilbert & George.⁹ As she observes, such teams directly embodied a critique of the certifying, original hand of the artist, for their works made it clear that more than one artist was making the art. The Harrisons' encyclopedic compilation of separate environmental studies and futurological predictions, *The Lagoon Cycle* (1974–84), demonstrates this fragmentation and specialization: They commissioned scientists, technicians, and model fabricators wherever they needed to assemble information and materials beyond their individual expertise.

There was a second way by which they complicated their pedagogical aim: The Harrisons' ability to persuade the audience of the importance of what they were saying depended on their communicating a relationship to history based on unusually long-term perspectives and hence on the invocation of memory. This immediately recalls the Poiriers, and, as it happens, both teams were at least distantly aware and positively respectful of each other's work. During the early 1970s, one way of invoking this perspective seemed to be to provide overwhelming detail. Another was to enfold historical evidence and autobiography alike in a laconic, matter-of-fact poetic style that was vague about precise metaphoric meaning: Donald Judd's criticism and Richard Long's or Hamish Fulton's lists and brief descriptions of land art walks were examples. Such lists were useful because, in Jack Burnham's words, they provided the "phenomenal qualities which would never have shown up in a fabricator's plans, but which proved necessary for the 'seeing' of the object."¹⁰ But simply fabricating miniature ecosystems as fantasies without real-time framing texts would not have achieved what the Harrisons wanted, for they wished to move beyond minimalist ambiguity and suggestiveness into more direct advocacy. The problem was to do this without falling prey to the impoverishment of artistic language by either political overdetermination or the indecipherable, problematically ambiguous aesthetics of inchoately recalled (but auratically enhanced) memory chains.



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Panel 4* and *Panel 6*, *The Third Lagoon*, from *The Lagoon Cycle* (1974–84). Installation view of two mural panels (*Panel 4*: 96 inches × 101 inches; *Panel 6*: 96 inches × 98 inches), detail from mural in more than fifty parts. Collection John Kluge, Metromedia.

The solution was to match overwhelming detail with an antiteleological relationship to artistic innovation. In other words, the Harrisons appropriated conceptual art without necessarily owing any commitment to its particular consciousness of art history. They freely admitted that they saw the language of conceptual art as available, like a ready-made. According to Newton Harrison, their art “was particularly related to other reductionist modes of that period.” The Harrisons’ complication of minimalist structures by the use of living organisms as elements was, within the strict terms of an inquiry into the nature of art, a gratuitous elaboration, but one that had precedents in conceptual art, with its declared separation of structure from meaning. On the other hand, their relation to recent art history was not simply one of style, in the sense that previous art could be merely mined for a series of surface effects, for their anthropology and sociology were practical, analytical, and ethnographic tools, as were Hans Haacke’s installations of the same period, rather than decorative flourishes. Such work is now, of course, widely recognized as part of the “literary” recomplication of art suggested by Craig Owens in “Earthwords,” where he outlined an artistic trajectory in which meaning surplus to the appropriate self-definition of a given artistic genre would be generated by metaphor.¹¹ The oscillation between the literary and the visual was common to much art, as we have seen, and this art’s terms were clearly extra-artistic—social rather than aesthetic—when measured by strict formalist definitions.

The Harrisons were also just not very interested in exploring the problem of art’s universality or its transcendence. Their installations embodied a vision of art as contingent upon place in space and upon location or circumstance in time. They were more concerned with the survival of natural systems than with the survival of art. They were disinterested in Kantian disinterest and therefore in Greenberg’s formalism. It is clear, though, that the Harrisons depended on the “given” disinterest of art as a framing discourse within which they could manipulate and refine their otherwise functional terms. More concretely, works such as *The Lagoon Cycle* exemplified the ethnographic tendency within 1970s art that we have already noted, but they did so in a way that redefined artistic work beyond the studio as an active, participatory type of cultural anthropology. The Harrisons were more concerned with the fate of the planet than with the fate of the avant-garde, and they were even less interested in a competitive, Hegelian avant-garde relationship to history in which art-historical sources would be remobilized and modified.

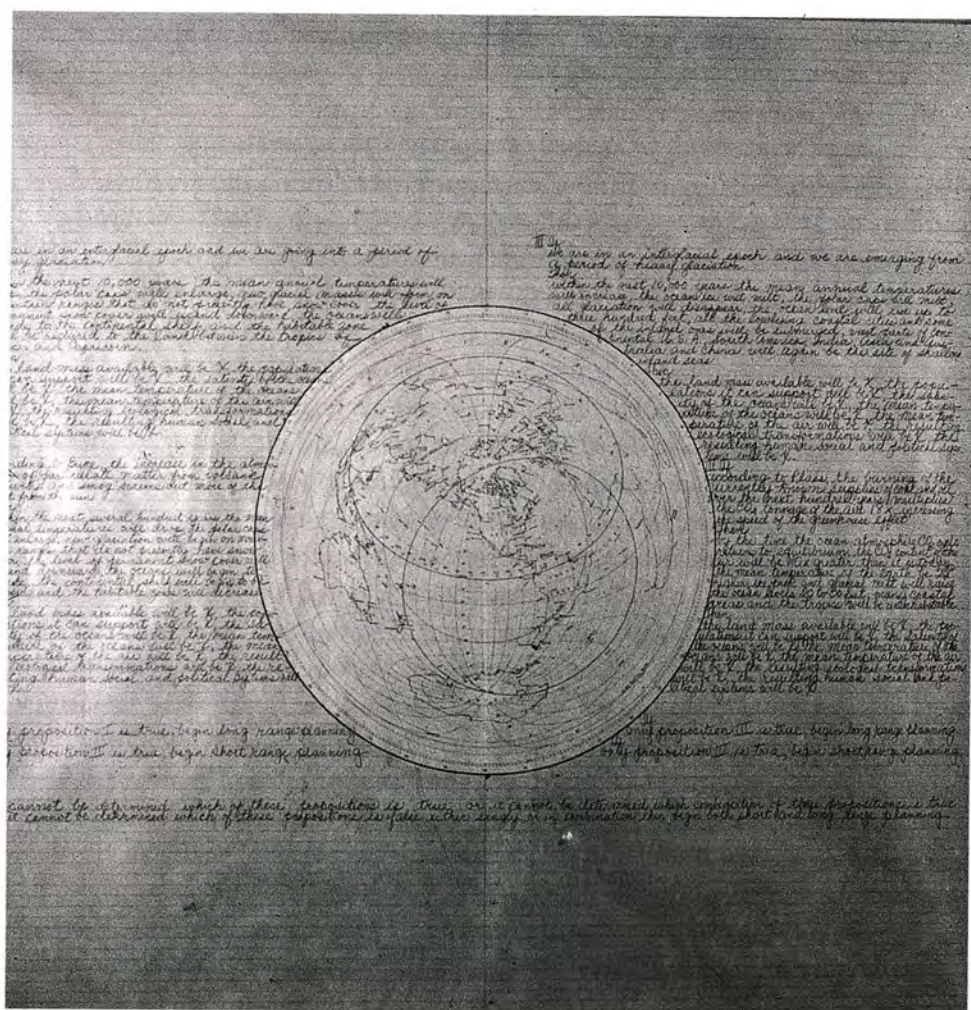
Where did this distinction come from? Craig Adcock noted their “choice of ecology as a ready-made practice,” linking this to their understanding of Duchamp.¹² The Harrisons specifically and pointedly acknowledged their special debt to Duchamp, but their intentions coincided with a view of avant-garde history characterized by interaction rather than rupture and by a positive disinterest in avant-garde maneuvers or a search for historical primacy. Robert Smithson was not specifically an influence upon their practice, but his textual Earth art would seem to have been an obvious model, as it was for other artists. The Harrisons said that they were conceptual artists

and that though they did not produce conventional paintings or sculptures, they did show in galleries and museums because such venues were “safe places” in which confrontations between competing discourses and groups could be enacted and resolved. Their benign installations would seem, then, to confirm Hal Foster’s characterization of the avant-garde’s second cyclical incarnation, as opposed to Peter Bürger’s theorization of the avant-garde’s failure. In Foster’s account, modernist history was replayed after 1945 for the second time, and its catharsis was strategically important.¹³

There was another side to the Harrisons’ relationship with avant-garde history. Their antimodernism ruled them out of possible inclusion in a canon such as Foster’s post-1945 avant-garde. Even though, and perhaps because, their work displayed all the signs of a politically strategic, interdisciplinary ethnography, it refused to interest itself in art-historical arbitration or to conceptualize itself within an avant-garde framework focused on Kantian transcendence. Their attitude was instead profoundly countercultural. *The Lagoon Cycle*, for example, looked like a set of straightforward environmental and conservation investigations. Only its discursive and physical location—within the domain of contemporary art, installed in art museums—and its ambiguous poetics distinguished it from ethnographic display. The Harrisons’ outsider status was comparable to that of the Boyles and Finlay: They all chose a position at the “periphery” from whence to critique the state of things rather than at the “center” to critique the state of art. This “periphery” was both metaphorical and literal. The Harrisons based themselves at Del Mar, California, near San Diego, from the 1970s on and worked seminomadically around the world as well. Del Mar is far enough away from New York—and even sufficiently distant from the nearest regional metropolis, Los Angeles—to qualify as peripheral, but the Harrisons were not interested in the idea of provincial or regional, California-based art either. Much of their working life was spent in Europe or in transit. Through a long-term ecological perspective, Sisyphean proposal preparation, and constant travel, they deliberately cultivated a global rather than a metropolitan perspective. This perspective meant that they did not necessarily conceptualize New York as the center of the world (nor the avant-garde as the locus of artistic value), and so they were able, in one early work, *San Diego as the Center of the World* (1974), to construct an azimuthal world projection with San Diego at its center.¹⁴

If the Harrisons, the Boyles, and the Poiriers all saw themselves as conservers of history and memory, so too did other teams define themselves in the same way. German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, who were often exhibited alongside minimalist artists, also saw memory as grammatical and ordered rather than as nostalgic in affect. They insisted that “[w]e do not intend to make reliquaries out of old industrial buildings. What we would like is to produce a more or less perfect chain of different forms and shapes.”¹⁵ Memory, for the Bechers, has rules and uses.

The Bechers worked together from 1959 onward and, according to former students, were almost inseparable, even sharing a teaching position (to the initial disapproval of the college administration) at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. Their long series



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *San Diego as the Center of the World* (1974). Photomural, azimuthal equidistant projection map of the world with San Diego, California, at the center. Photographs, oils, and graphite, 96 inches x 96 inches. Collection Power Institute, University of Sydney, Sydney.

of documentary photographs of cooling towers, blast furnaces, mine heads, and industrial buildings were, according to the artists, a contribution to the archive of industrial archaeology. Their documentations of obsolete industrial plants were valued by cultural historians as well as celebrated by minimalist artists.¹⁶ And they were categorized as minimalist or conceptualist artists because of their exhaustive enumeration of subject matter and their patient determination to record every possible variation of whatever type of industrial plant they chose, even though the differences were minute. The Bechers consistently insisted on the sociological and conservationist dimensions of their photographs: The artistic parameters of their activity—documenting obsolescent industrial cooling towers and furnaces made between 1860 and 1960 that were

disappearing from a postindustrial world—were determined by their desire to preserve and record but were organized according to morphological similarities of form as well as function.

The consistency of their methods accentuated these similarities: They almost always took their photographs at the same time of year (spring and autumn) and on overcast days (to take advantage of diffused, neutral light), from the same slightly elevated point of view, without any human figures, using very long exposures. They painstakingly shot photographs from the midpoint of each tower in order to study each object from the same position. As has often been noted, this consistency allowed a grammar of forms to emerge. It also, however, allowed their series to extend almost infinitely in the establishment of different industrial types, limited solely by the availability of old factories. Like the Harrisons, the Boyles, and the Poiriers, the Bechers established an archive that was stratified and organized by repetition into types, or as they suggested, “families,” in arrangements of up to nine similar towers organized on the same panel.¹⁷ Again, archives are not encyclopedias: The Bechers’ aims were not encyclopedic but, like the Poiriers’, archaeological and archival. They enlarged their principles of organization with each large group of work so that previous typologies were found to be insufficient: “Our selections are obvious but it has taken us many years to realise they are obvious. . . . Within each group there are the same distinctions and more.”¹⁸ It must be noted that the Bechers did not specify anything other than the creation and organization of an archive as their starting point. The artistic method of anonymity that valued surface characteristics and the extension of an archive coincided with a personal decision to collaborate—a coincidence shared with the three other teams.

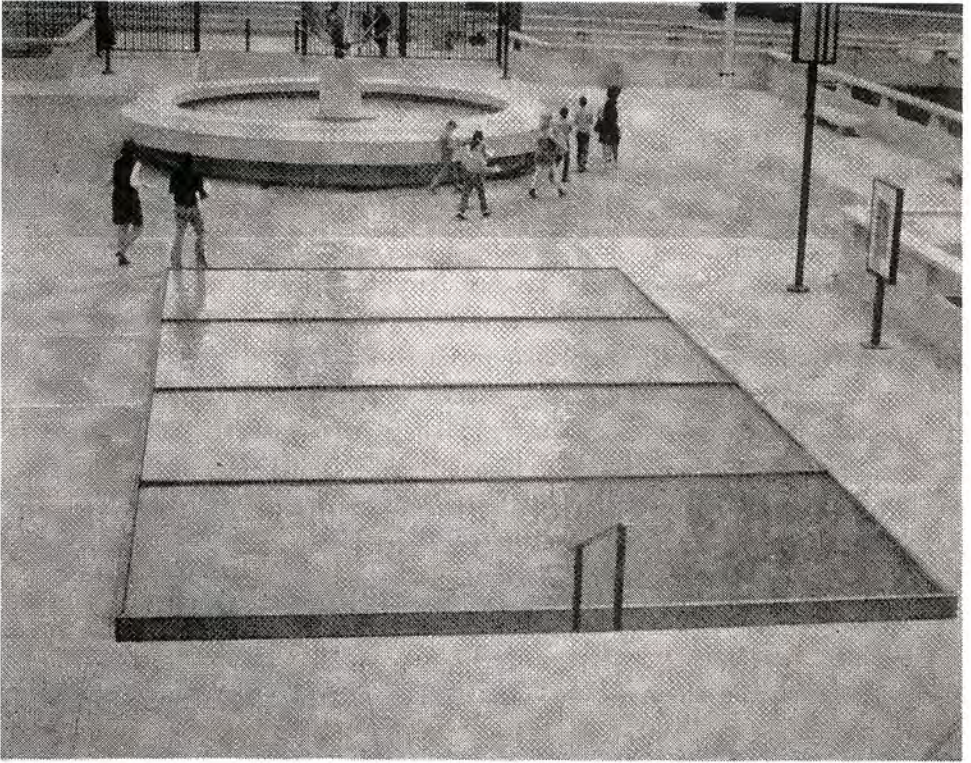
Artistic collaboration was consistent with this perspective on history, in which countercultural ideas and collective work could loom large: As we saw, Newton Harrison linked the Harrisons’ decision to work collaboratively with the quintessential 1960s countercultural penchant for basing a life’s work on an arbitrary decision such as a throwing of dice or a divinatory exercise like the *I Ching*. Such countercultural perspectives were not uncommon among young artists in North America or Europe in the 1960s. The Harrisons admired Carl Gustav Jung’s teachings enormously, and they recalled that alternative psychotherapist Fritz Perls (who was trained by Jung) had a big impact upon them both; Helen Mayer Harrison even worked under Perls and completed an internship with Carl Rogers. Even so, the Harrisons insisted that they had no interest at all in the culture of psychedelic drugs, nor did they have any interest in ecstatic mystical traditions. On the other hand, they had certainly been influenced by consciousness-raising psychotherapy that did not involve psychedelic substances, and they had a long-standing commitment to environmental action, having read Rachel Carson’s landmark book on looming environmental disaster, *Silent Spring*, as early as 1962.

Ironically, then, Newton Harrison’s last noncollaborative work embodied one of the most striking psychedelic tropes: the light show. The Los Angeles County Museum

of Art (LACMA) commissioned a light work, *The Encapsulated Aurora* (1970), for Osaka's Expo 70; it was later exhibited in LACMA's giant 1971 *Art and Technology* exhibition, curated by Maurice Tuchman.¹⁹ The artist, who was teamed with the Jet Propulsion Laboratories, produced long, cylindrical plexiglass tubes filled with gas that glowed in darkness, as if color had been made to hang in the air—a high-technology vision of color liberated from its support.²⁰ *The Encapsulated Aurora's* disembodied ethereality could equally, of course, have been seen as a three-dimensional equivalent of Jules Olitski's paintings, which show the latent but disavowed mysticism inherent in late-formalist painting, despite formalist critics' temperamental distaste for popular culture and the highly theatrical counterculture.

The Harrisons' first installations were the *Survival Series* (1971–73). These large, laboriously constructed simulacra of small, simple ecosystems reflect the development of a trajectory—one that aimed to leave the lightest and most invisible of footprints in the environment—different and separate from the Earth art characterized by Robert Smithson or Michael Heizer.²¹ Their first fish farm, the fulsomely titled *Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp: Survival Piece #2* (1971), reflects the zeitgeist of the U.S. domestic context at the beginning of the 1970s—increasing ecological consciousness, flourishing conservation movements, and the proliferation of communes—incorporating the inevitable biosphere, a modern Noah's ark, and New Age ritual.²² The work (also exhibited at LACMA's *Art and Technology*) may have constituted the first discrete ecosystem to be used as both subject matter and materials in art. Its ritual associations were lost neither on contemporary viewers nor on the Harrisons, who invented elaborate and somewhat contrived rituals ("Harvesting and Feasting" actions) for *Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp: Survival Piece #2*. When *Portable Fish Farm: Survival Piece #3* (1971) was installed in London for the exhibition *Eleven Los Angeles Artists*, the Harrisons built six large rubber-lined tanks containing catfish, brine shrimp, and lobsters. They harvested and cooked the fish as the marine animals grew, but their attempts to serve the cooked fish to the audience provoked complaints from English animal liberationists. The artists had initially felt that each of these works was a minimalist "field" and that, at a certain level, a shift in scale was the only structural difference between their fish farms and Sol LeWitt's wall drawings or Carl Andre's floor pieces. However, Newton Harrison observed that when the works were realized, "the outcome turned out to be something other than a minimalist or conceptualist work of art."²³

Up to this point, the Harrisons were dividing their labor according to gender-defined roles: nurturing, washing, and cooking were allocated to Helen; Newton built and maintained the tank and ecosystem. According to the artists, 1970–71 was a period of research in which they established the methods and routines possible with collaboration, and between 1971–73 they experimented with gender-coded, highly determined performances and rituals, whose gender divisions they were later to firmly reject.



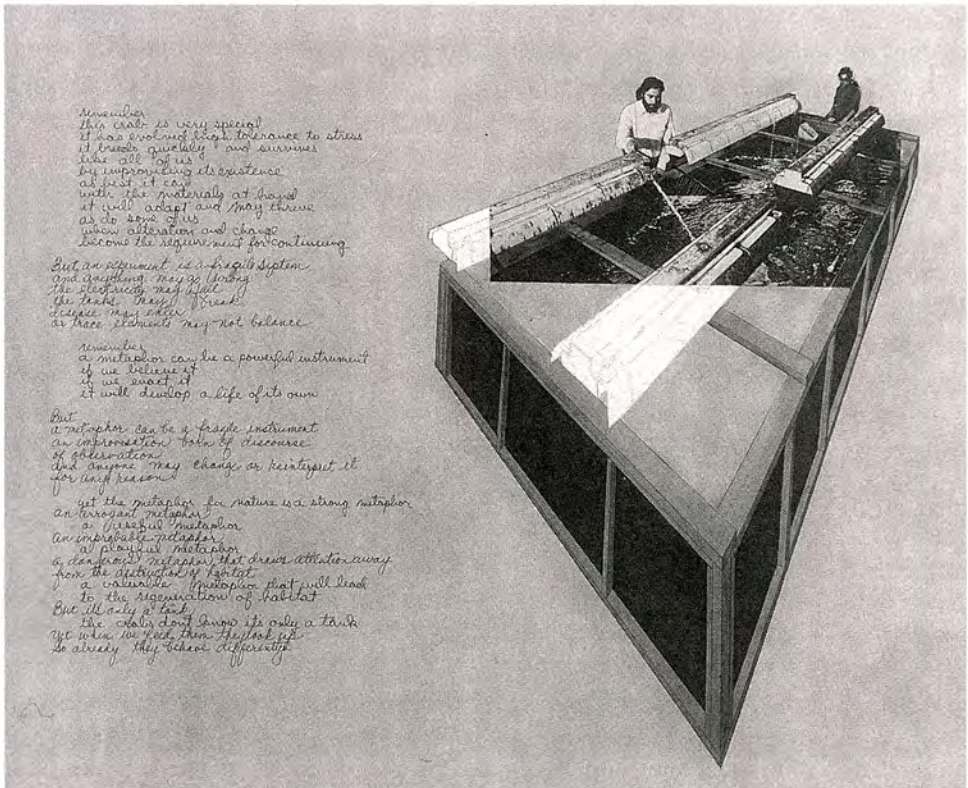
Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp: Survival Piece #2* (1971). Installation view, wooden box, 120 inches x 480 inches x 10 inches, with four compartments, containing *Dunaliella* algae and *Artemia* brine shrimp ecosystem, up to one ton per acre harvest rate. Exhibited in *Art and Technology*, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles (1971).

It is important to remember the different connotations and disjunctions of technology and ecology from the late 1960s on. Jack Burnham observed in 1974 that the notion of ecological art, as distinct from art about machines, was well advanced long before Tuchman's gigantic *Art and Technology* project in 1971.²⁴ Global survival in the face of supposedly impending worldwide ecological catastrophe, according to many contemporary observers, prompted a crystallization of this distinction. Artists' fascination with technology had therefore been ambivalent rather than affirmative for some time, and nouveau réaliste artist Jean Tinguely's self-destructive machines, for example, were only one such manifestation of this. Pontus Hulten had curated *The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age* at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) in 1968, and this exhibition foregrounded technology's phantasmagoric aspect as much as its wonder and power. At the start of the 1970s, however, the gap between Earth artists such as Smithson or Heizer on the one hand and the Harrisons or Haacke on the other definitely widened as conservation groups mobilized against technological despoliation of the environment. The Harrisons observed, "They [Smithson and Heizer] used earth as material; we feel that our works were amongst the first to deal

with ecology in the full sense of the term. The key test for ecological art is the concept of the niche.²⁵ It seems that collaboration shifted Newton Harrison toward a less technologically oriented art and toward a more social practice, for Helen Mayer Harrison was temperamentally opposed to using capital-intensive machines in art. Helen Mayer Harrison may have directed the key decisions through which the two artists moved their joint works toward a more text-based, consultative art and away from labor- and capital-intensive virtual ecosystems.²⁶

Both artists certainly felt that Earth art was ethically deficient. They based this perception on works such as Heizer's great geometric notch cut into the side of a valley, *Double Negative* (1969–70); Smithson's spiral of bulldozed rubble edging out into Utah's Great Salt Lake, *Spiral Jetty* (1970); and the most notorious, Smithson's aborted 1970 project to cover an island near Vancouver, British Columbia, with broken glass. Earth artists damaged or destroyed the immediate environment without serious regard for its plants and animals. The Harrisons, like other people who encountered Smithson competitively, found him touchy and easily offended. After *Spiral Jetty* was finished, they asked him if they could work with algae and brine shrimp at the site in order to return the water around the spiral ramp to its natural color. They explained to Smithson why the water at the edge of the spiral had turned red (the algae turned red in response to increased salinity). He refused their proposal outright. The Harrisons published their disagreement, but further discussions were aborted because, immediately afterward, Smithson died in a light-aircraft accident. The Harrisons felt a far greater affinity with Walter de Maria, observing that his concept determined a work's form "in transaction with the natural," but despite their admiration for de Maria, a gulf separates works such as his *Lightning Field* (1977) from *The Lagoon Cycle*. De Maria's poles were imposed on their Rocky Mountains environment, marking out the harsh, messy plateau vegetation with spooky, science-fiction precision. The Harrisons' work, on the other hand, existed as descriptions and simulacra. When their models of parallel, environmentally benign possibilities were realized on a large scale outside the museum, they represented an apparent return to environmentally sustainable states in which very little artistic intervention was obvious at all. The difference between the Harrisons and Earth artists would seem to lie in attitudes toward real-time intervention and its consequences and therefore in the Harrisons' interest in actions planned according to an enlarged ethical perspective.

According to Newton Harrison, there was a transition in their work from systems (which they equated with the conceptual) into narration during the 1970s, recalling the transition in the Poiriers' projects during the same period. *Lagoon—Simulating Monsoon* (1973) was an 8' × 10' × 3' fish tank in which the Harrisons simulated an estuarial system near the equator. They established a healthy colony of edible Sri Lankan crabs in the tank to prove a point about environmental change and natural forces, but the work had another, equally benign, but almost theistic connotation: According to Jack Burnham, "Harrison feels that when he is taking care of the crabs on their



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Panel 2, The Second Lagoon*, from *The Lagoon Cycle* (1974–84). Mural panel, detail from mural, 96 inches x 90 inches, in more than fifty parts. Collection John Kluge, Metromedia. This work is based on a photograph of *Lagoon—Simulating Monsoon* (1973), a fish tank, 96 inches x 120 inches x 36 inches, simulating an equatorial estuarial system at Del Mar, California, part of the *Sea Grant* (1974) project.

terms, he is substituting for nature.”²⁷ The example of conceptual art had opened the Harrisons’ eyes to the “total freedom to work with complexity,” but they had no desire to leave unforeseen, damaging loose ends arising from their art. *The Meditations on the Sacramento River, the Delta, and the Bays at San Francisco* (1976–77), for example, was a reasoned, researched critique of the green revolution and industrialized agrobusiness; it was presented as billboards, a performance, and posters. *The Meditations on the Sacramento River* used “art” as a discursive site within which they could situate real-time demonstrations and futures modeling. Fiction was to play a considerable role in these demonstrations, specifically fictional projections of new geopolitical divisions: In a work centered on the Great Lakes of the same year, they reinvented North America’s political boundaries, proposing that the citizens of the Great Lakes region secede from both the United States and Canada to form a new, ecologically conscious nation. The extra-artistic character of these projects is not insignificant, for the artists’ domination of critical discourse surrounding their work occurred not simply because they imposed their will upon critics but because their learning didactically directed the audience’s responses away from art.

Dialogue, Conversational Drift, and Forgetting

The phrase “expanding conversations” recurs in the Harrisons’ commentaries. It characterizes a work of utterly exhausting scale and complexity that they commenced in the mid-1970s: an enormous, 360-foot-long text-and-photomural whose installation was not completed until the mid-1980s. *The Lagoon Cycle* included photographs, maps, and two small artificial ponds in which the artists simulated the effects of monsoons upon estuary creatures. They also presented long semifictional, semiautobiographical performance-dialogues between two characters, “The Lagoonmaker” and “The Witness,” and these dialogues were transcribed into the exhibition catalog. As Newton Harrison noted, “[T]hey read as inspired propaganda in poetic form, and the art aspect is not discussed.”²⁸ In later projects, they organized their research and reflections into similar fictional discussions. These odd, heavily scripted conversations resembled joint poetry readings about the new perspectives gained during their collaborative work and about their own implied place in the dialogues. They worked better as performances than as text: In performance, the dialogues had something of the laconic quality of Laurie Anderson’s cryptic soliloquies (of, say, *Americans on the Move* [1979]) but as printed texts, like Anderson’s bleak parables, they were portentous and somewhat wooden. In the opening passage of the Harrisons’ dialogue for *Atempause für den Save Fluss* (Breathing Space for the Sava River) (1988–90), they discussed the uncertainty and the motives behind designating public discourse as art. Their dialogue rehearsed the way that their collaboration was a metaphor for a wider cooperative work, that of creating the sense of responsibility that they saw as being directly linked to memory. This memory was necessary to save the Sava River, which flows through Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia:

How do I know we will say anything worth
listening to
will it be remembered for more than a
moment
You said
Remembering and forgetting are in
totality
the sum of human understanding.²⁹

Their dialogues were clearly a way of turning aside from the adversarial confrontation that seemed to be inherent in ecological activism. It is, after all, hard to argue with poetry. In a 1991 artists’ statement for the *Team Spirit* catalog, they wrote: “[A]n aesthetic exists always in interaction with, and in commentary on, a larger social context . . . to isolate an aesthetic and attempt to make it unrelated to other things is impossible.”³⁰ The Harrisons insisted on embedding visual art within textual discourse, whether simply within the framework of an installation that combined text with images or within the wider context of “conversations” started outside the art museum.

Principally, however, they located their work within the museum's walls because of the advantages of its ecological niche within capitalist society: The art museum is almost uniquely nonthreatening, no matter what artists think.

What, though, was the point of such elliptical, ambiguous discourse? Susan Fillin-Yei wrote:

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.³¹

Their formal conversations attempted to persuade the listener of the possibility of what the Harrisons frequently referred to as "parallel vision," for they believed that fixed beliefs about the future and the present are costly and should be accompanied by imagined alternatives, both feasible and less likely: according to the Harrisons, alternative histories of a particular fictive type.

The genealogy of such proposals is Nietzschean, mediated through countercultural influences that included the German philosopher among its own sources. Elizabeth Grosz explains the German philosopher's identification of self and memory thus:

Nietzsche wants to locate the primordial or mythical origins of culture in the ability to make promises, the ability to keep one's word, to propel into the future an avowal made in the past or present. This ability to make promises is dependent on the constitution of an interiority, a moral sense, a will. The will to remember, which Nietzsche characterized in this case as an active desire, a desire not to rid oneself, "a desire for the continuance of something desired once, a real memory of the will" . . . The ability to make promises involves renouncing forgetfulness, at least in part, and, in spite of intervening events, being able to put intention or commitment into action.³²

Certainly the rationale behind generating scenarios, proposals, and possibilities, which is what the Harrisons systematically made from *The Lagoon Cycle* onward, would seem to lie in this Nietzschean reidentification of self—at least as Grosz exhaustively describes it in this long excerpt—and with the idea of the self as constituted by the ability to make promises in the context of an active "counterforgetfulness." All action, therefore, first requires forgetting. Richard Terdiman recasts this activity (via Walter Benjamin) through the prism of modernity's memory crisis rather than through Antonio Gramsci's more familiar term "hegemony":

[Nietzsche] conceptualizes how the investment of the present by the past . . . colonizes the mind and restricts the creative potentiality of human beings. It does so in a vast structure of routinized social and cultural practices that no one consciously elects and everyone inevitably experiences. The control exercised by these structures is

uncannily spectral, and all the more threatening for its invisibility. Authentic originality, decisive action, thus require enforcing a rupture with the past.³³

The Harrisons identified their artistic self with the projection of will through constructive fantasy and positive commitments rather than through the perpetuation of inherited cultural patterns or personal expressive subjectivities. These sentiments were at the same time the basis of much countercultural political action, familiar to later generations through concepts such as “playpower.”³⁴ But the Harrisons’ cultivation of impersonal voices, proliferation of information, reconstruction of pristine ecosystems, and invention of multiple futures were intimately connected with the capacity to remember and to constructively replace one type of memory with another (to counterforget) rather than to retreat into oblivion. Theirs was a recognition of visual memory as contingent and not as a hyperabstraction. Above all, it was a recognition of the often malign weight and sheer mediating force of memory.

We must note something else, given the sheer complexity of the Harrisons’ works: The texts were not even lucid, although they were clearly written and assembled with considerable lucidity and intellectual coherence. The effect of such an overload of information, and of the dramatization of so much information, was delirium. Looking at their installations did not establish order. Rather, it opened a door onto the experience of a labyrinth.

Collaboration facilitated this reorientation and disorientation of self. The Harrisons spoke in the third person, and they downplayed traditional signs of visual creativity such as handwriting or expressive self-illustration in favor of typewritten text and photography: “Much of our work . . . has no signature. . . . In fact, the larger the idea, the greater the anonymity.”³⁵ As proof, there was also a shift in their collaborative method. Beginning in the early 1970s, they began to move away from the stereotypical binary roles of female and male, in which women were linked to nurturing roles and men to hunting and which they had celebrated in their early performances. They also began to depart from the collaborative divisions of labor hypothesized by many critics, so that Helen Harrison was no longer the “researcher” and Newton Harrison the “maker.” The creation of new genderless identities—*The Witness* and *The Lagoonmaker*—reflected a conscious desire to move away from binary cultural opposites such as male/female, nature/culture, work/leisure, and good/bad. They were defining the niche comprising “eco-artist” against the categories of land art or Earth art, and they did this by eliminating the signs of their identifiable, individual personalities in favor of many roles and voices.

Such interdisciplinary art also further collapsed or ignored the boundaries of artistic categories—the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and theater—and the boundary between art and nonart that had been so important to formalist critics. *The Serpentine Lattice* (1993) is a slide installation describing the disappearing North American Pacific Coast temperate rain forest. The Harrisons proposed that the remaining areas of rain forest be seen as a lattice—a patchwork of forest and cleared land—

and their insight was that the resulting lattice could be seen, in multiple views through overlays and the reversal of figure and ground, as an iconic form. They produced a conceptual design and a planning document in which several different perspectives were emphasized. At the heart of *The Serpentine Lattice* project is a large, semitransparent parchment map of the great vanished forest laid over a recent Geological Survey map of the same region. In the gallery space, the parchment, hanging in darkness, resembled a brain set inside a skull, and inside this, the shape of the enormous original forest was a long serpentine.³⁶ We can compare *The Serpentine Lattice* to Anne and Patrick Poirier's *Mnemosyne* (1991): *Mnemosyne* is a representation of a city that coheres into the shape of a brain, whereas *The Serpentine Lattice* is the representation of an ecological process that cohered into an iconic, serpentine shape inside a skull. The Harrisons developed and repeated this image through the rest of their installation, using the iconic form as a mnemonic device that would refer viewers to plans for the forests' regeneration.

The mnemonic power they ascribed to icons was immense. According to the Harrisons, these icons exist in real time as evolving forms—emblems abstracted from the shapes of “green” corridors or zones—and in *Green Heart Vision's* media release, the Harrisons wrote: “The Green Heart Vision put forward by the Harrisons is a single form that encodes a complex array of functions, processes and concerns. The form itself is a ring around the Green Heart, approximately 140 kilometres long and one to two kilometres wide, that we call the Ring of Biodiversity.”³⁷ Another artists' book, *A Brown Coal Park for Sudraum Leipzig* (1996), contains a diagram of park boundaries transformed into a logo resembling a snowflake. This image was to be commemorated and celebrated. It was to be at the heart of Sudraum Leipzig's new, invented identity, much as New Age ritual performances had been at the heart of the Harrisons' early installations. They captioned the *Brown Coal Park* diagrams with a short statement:

Where the shape of turned earth
in Sudraum Leipzig
can be seen
at its smallest scale as a logo
and at its largest scale as a new icon
in the cultural landscape.³⁸

The great importance of icons was that they were a conceptual tool mediating between information and action. Reducing ecological proposals to iconic logos was a simple visual method of grasping a complex abstraction—the ecology of a particular environment—without being overwhelmed by it. Most important, icons can be memorized. Just as Elizabeth Grosz characterizes Nietzsche as arguing that “a counterforgetfulness needs to be instituted,” so icons were aids to this counterforgetfulness. The concept is akin to Joseph Beuys's idea of “social sculpture” or Robert Smithson's late projects, such as his proposal for the Dallas–Fort Worth Regional Airport (1969).³⁹



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Green Heart Vision* (1995). Installation view of proposal prepared for the Cultural Council of Southern Holland and the Province of South Holland, proposing an ecological corridor, 1–2 kilometers wide, separating urban from agricultural areas in the Randstad.

The imaginary status of the Harrisons' plans or visions has to be emphasized: The artists described their working process as the creation of possible worlds, worlds that were, strictly speaking, semifictional. *The Lagoon Cycle* and *The Serpentine Lattice* were combinations of photographic installations, books, wall texts, and maps. Some of this information was factual (the collation of scientific and sociological fieldwork), and another part was analytical (critiques and assessments), but a large amount—dispersed throughout the works—consisted of the visualization of the consequences of constructive change. These texts, diagrams, and maps purported to be documentary, historical, and sociological records of the same status as the rest of the works, but essentially they were fictions. This type of “forgery”—we can call it that for the moment—has precedents. It was common for authors of medieval religious texts, for example, to claim that they had discovered manuscripts written in earlier periods; such works are called pseudoepigraphic (we encountered the same term in the discussion

of the Poiriers), seeking the authority that comes from authorship by an ancient, respected source. Pseudoepigraphic media have changed, of course: Photography has now become the most authoritative form of visual text, representing the empirical world for most inhabitants of industrialized societies. For the Harrisons, culture and ideology could be reconstructed from the fiction of projected documentary futures set among photographs and maps of environmental despoliation. The genealogy of these fictions is also quite old—war narratives and chronicles—and the Harrisons' maps, as Michel de Certeau observed in his essay for *The Lagoon Cycle's* exhibition catalog, were like maps of battlegrounds or disaster zones.⁴⁰ Once again, as for the Poiriers and for Art & Language, seeing was equated—this time through scientific studies of the future—with war.

The extreme demands that such composite works made on the viewer's patience and time could possibly be compensated for by the production of an almost cinematic spectacle, as in the liminal installation of *The Serpentine Lattice*. On the other hand, the impatient viewer's boredom could be, as it had been in conceptual art and especially in Joseph Kosuth's later *Investigations*, incorporated into the work both as a gatekeeping deterrent and as a simulacrum of the artists' own creative process. The Harrisons, like Kosuth, allowed incomprehension, coincidence, and inadvertent encounters (encounters with art as small paid advertisements in newspapers, for example) to order the overload of information with which they dealt. The Harrisons' projects, installed in a gallery, are excerpts from an archive, not an encyclopedia, of organized factual and fictional material, and archival organization permits many entrance points into the works' narratives.

How was the artists' own creative process linked to the Nietzschean "ability to make promises" and "counterforgetfulness"? The Harrisons absolutely insisted that they worked only where they were invited, according to a precept of conversational drift. They would pursue a project where they were welcomed, even if that was in the most uncomprehending way, but they would walk away from projects where their proposals met indifference, just as they would put partly completed projects on hold wherever and whenever they met resistance, in order to work on the myriad other proposals and exhibitions that they were simultaneously developing. If they pushed, they believed, they would be pushed out. A proposal for a work about Tibet that they began in the early 1990s, *Tibet Is the High Ground* (1995), met this fate.⁴¹ They presented a project to create an "analog" forest to replace that of vast deforested areas in Tibet, and this, they hoped, would stimulate beneficial changes in weather patterns. The artists' book detailing the prospectus outlined a typical combination of activities to be organized by the Harrisons: symposia, plans, documentation, and correspondence for a project to turn Tibet into a "Peace Park," according to the Dalai Lama's already-existing and widely publicized proposal. After an initial burst of enthusiasm from the Dalai Lama and his staff, everything went wrong. The concept encountered extreme hostility from the Chinese, which forced friends, curators, and museums with whom the artists were working—and who wished to be able to work with the

Republic of China—to take sides. The Harrisons put the work into indefinite suspension. The same process was illustrated by their project to regenerate the Sava River, which was halted by the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the fighting that followed. The conversation, they observed, “drifted away.”

The Harrisons were relatively indifferent to the particular critique of museums mounted by the neo-avant-garde during the 1970s and 1980s. Their desire to “make a difference” could only occur in the wider world, not in a reformulation of the art museum, which they saw as simply presenting otherwise unavailable opportunities, as did Hans Haacke: It would be a safe house but was not a necessary given. On the other hand, the artistic identities chosen by the Harrisons were performative, self-consciously discursive, and located within a wide field of social interaction. The role of artist was a negotiating tool rather than a given, even though they were both extraordinarily charismatic and impressive in person. In this sense, their collaborative persona has to be understood as different, despite other affinities, from that of Arakawa and Madeline Gins, and even more from that of Robert Smithson. They had no time for the enumeration of tautologies with which other artists were busy, for they were too busy outside the studio, cleaning up the environmental mess.

Conservation and Art

The artists of chapters 3, 4, and 5 took artistic form as a ready-made. Their works were nascently postmodern, but in a particularly troubling way, for various tropes taken to be axiomatic in postmodern art—irony, double coding, allegorical fragmentation—were more or less absent in favor of an unusual and tenacious belief in memory as an ethical prompt. We are now habituated to second-degree and third-degree visual strategies, but these artists seemed indifferent to the distinction between a quotation of the past and absorption in the past. Their relation to conservation blurred into a conservationism that marginalized their work. Each team saw its work occurring in relative isolation, separate from the great avant-garde narratives embodied by what they saw as more fashionable, mainstream art—the art featured on the pages of *Artforum* and theorized in *October* (strangely enough, all three teams received a fairly flattering quantity of attention from such journals over the decades). Instead, the Poiriers, the Harrisons, and the Boyles consciously chose positions at the physical or mental peripheries of the art world: in San Diego, in scattered remote wilderness areas, and in a far-off imaginary classical world.

Such positions were all the better to preserve and cultivate the role of ethical outsiders within the world of contemporary art, because these artists believed that images should be read as texts, linking visibility to ethics and memory.⁴² Unlike conceptual artists and many Earth artists, who saw ecological and social debates as the raw materials upon which to create the framing discourses that constituted their art, the Boyles, the Poiriers, and the Harrisons saw the content inside the artwork’s frame as crucial rather than arbitrary: Artistic content was not a hall of mirrors; rather,

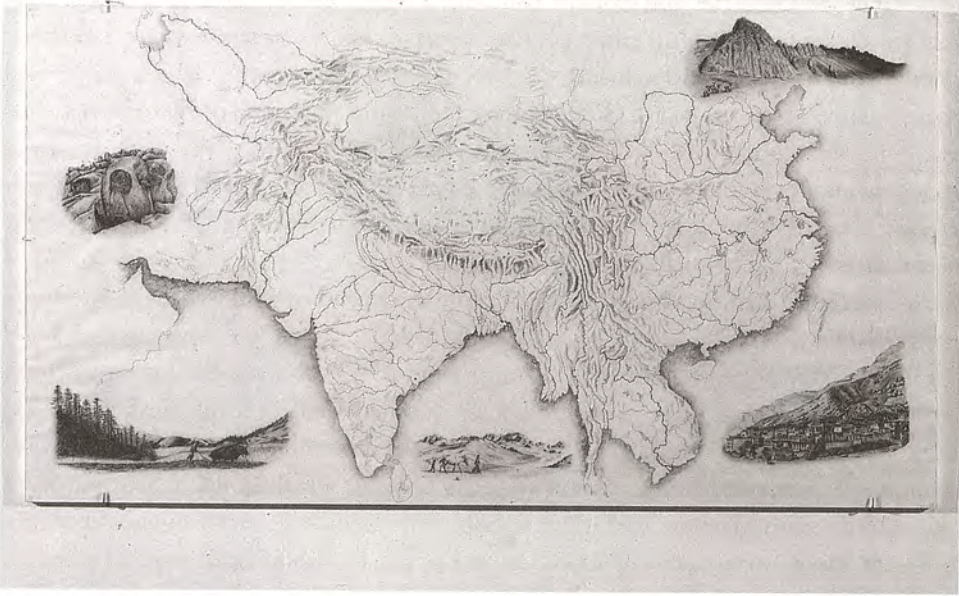
TIBET IS THE
HIGH GROUND



NEWTON HARRISON
AND
HELEN MAYER HARRISON

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, cover of *Tibet Is the High Ground*, artists' book (Del Mar, Calif.: Harrison Studio, 1995).

Tibet is the High Ground



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, page 9 of *Tibet Is the High Ground*, artists' book (Del Mar, Calif.: Harrison Studio, 1995).

collaboration was the part of the “frame” of the work of art that destabilized its boundaries. The type of memory that the three teams were interested in and, as we have seen, that both the Poiriers and the Harrisons clearly articulated in written statements, was creative, active, and connected with their understanding of archives. But it was also iconic, symbolic, and purposefully both indecipherable and overdetermined. Their impressive access to interdisciplinary information was based on an understanding that archives were a means of access to nonartistic specialist fields for artists who were able to read and sift information selectively and unsystematically. Neither team saw memory as a passive repository of information, as the information in a mental computer upon which a subject might draw, even though they borrowed extensively from writers who did. Their notion of memory was more active. They saw it as more than a faculty, as a part of the subject’s basic identity: The self is remembered and remembering is representation, for retrieval ultimately fails. The Poiriers’ temples and libraries were models of a mental life composed of modules, not unlike the architectural model of the mind proposed by British archaeologist Steven Mithen and others. The great library that they elaborated over decades was a thinly veiled metaphor for the reading rooms, chapels, and vast spaces of their own joint collaborative “mind.”

This constructed self—one composed of chosen memories—sits apparently at odds with the attempts of the artists in chapters 1 and 2 to test, through collaborations, their perception that the self was essentially empty and void and that artistic identity was in essence meaningless except as strategic decisions in a game of chess. Both conceptions, however, refused more traditional ideas of the artistic self as essentially separate from its objects: One notion tended toward the denial of the subject’s real existence; the other to a refusal of its autonomy. Both constituted an anticipation of what would become postmodern orthodoxy over the following decade, but they had an unexpectedly ethical emphasis that resurfaced in many younger artists’ ethnographic and archivist works during the later 1990s. Collaboration, which suppressed the evidence of an artist’s hand, reinforced the iconic textuality of their works. The avoidance of the hand in place of thought stressed the iconic at the expense of the indexical and iconology at the expense of iconography and allegory. It thus ran counter to much better known trajectories bridging late modernism and the postmodern, and it clearly recontextualizes the emergence of postmodern art as a prolongation of the modern, at least because its crisis of representation was haunted by modernity’s memory crisis.

Finally, the family structure of these collaborations inflected their production in a particular way, and their works obviously declared their multiple authorship, for they were either demonstrably heterogeneous or else determinedly anonymous in style. This was in contrast to the artists of chapters 6–9, for whom collaboration involved the identification of artists with their art and with each other. According to that very different model of artistic collaboration, art could be the embodiment of personal union. This was to be an obsessive, dangerous, and potentially unstable working method. The long-term stability of the collaborations between the artists in the last

three chapters was equally predictable. Their collaborations continue into the new century, and their works can increasingly be seen as subtly different from those of their peers with whom they were compared during earlier decades. The collaborations of Boyle Family, Anne and Patrick Poirier, and Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison were protective identities, behind which diverse and fluid production methods and discursive specializations could occur without policing by traditional gender divisions of labor, hierarchy, and prestige.