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Shifting Positions toward the Earth: Art and Environmental Awareness

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison
Our work begins when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. Moments when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous offer the opportunity to create new spaces—first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life.

We understand the universe as a giant conversation taking place simultaneously in trillions of voices and billions of languages, most of which we could not conceive of even if we knew that they existed. Of those voices whose existence has impinged on our own to the degree that we can become aware of them, we realize that our awareness is imperfect at best. Therefore, it seems to us that the casual and wanton destruction and disruption of living systems of whose relationships we know so little requires extraordinary hubris.

For us, everything started with a decision made in the late 1960s to deal exclusively with issues of survival as best we could perceive them. Each body of work sought a larger or more comprehensive framing or understanding of what such a notion might mean and how we, as artists, might express it. For example, in *The Seventh Lagoon* of *The Lagoon Cycle*, we came up with the statement, “But that would require reorienting consciousness around a different database.”

We are now exploring what such a statement might mean—unpacking our intuitive ideas. Our most recent work opens up the idea of setting up an eco-security system, a safety net for the ecology not unlike a social-security system. However, there are issues such as the population explosion that need a separate and comprehensive address, for just as prairie grass would displace everything that is not itself, so would any expanding population. The notion that ingenious technology will resolve population pressures on the one hand and generate infinitely expanding markets on

This paper, originally published in *Leonardo* 26, no. 5 (1993), documents some of Helen Meyer Harrison and Newton Harrison’s seminal projects using art to expand environmental awareness. Since this paper was written, their new projects have included *Peninsula Europe: The High Ground* (2000 ongoing to 2005), *The Green Heart of Holland* (1994–1997), and *The Endangered Meadows of Europe* (1994–1997).
the other is simply an illusion. It is too easy to forget that every entrepre-
neural act, even recycling, is itself a tax on the ecosystem.

The works that we describe and present here are excerpts from nar-
ratives that have engendered projects or stories that may engender pro-
jects in the future. The Lagoon Cycle is its own story, presenting a series
of our adventures and thereby telling of expanding ecological aware-
ness. Breathing Space for the Sava River was on its way to happening when
the war in the former Yugoslavia began. Tibet Is the High Ground is a
project we are working to make happen. The Sacramento Meditations,
originally exhibited in 1977, is still only in its beginnings. The latter
three projects required, or would require, the cooperation of many
others in our dialogs—ecologists, landscape architects, engineers, and
politicians.


This work is, in part, a mural 360 feet long, averaging 8 feet tall, in sixty
parts (figure 10.1). It was completed over the period 1973 to 1985. It is
portable, done on photomural paper mounted on heavy cotton duck.
The materials are photography, oil, graphite, crayon, and ink. It was
first exhibited in complete form at the Johnson Gallery at Cornell
University 1985 and then later at the Los Angeles County Museum of
Art.¹

The Lagoon Cycle can be read as a story in seven parts; each part, as
in a picaresque novel, is its own story. It can be read as an array of
storyboards for a very unusual movie. As artists, we see it as an environ-
mental narrative, one of whose properties is to envelop the viewer with
its form and subject matter. For us, this work relates to other twentieth-
century environmental works as well as to the myriad mural programs of
the past.

The Lagoon Cycle unfolds as a discourse between two characters who
discuss the ways in which the metaphors we live by affect what we do to
each other and to the environment. It casts light on how we create our
worldview and are in turn created by it. The Lagoon Cycle is named for
the estuarial lagoons that are endangered everywhere; the lagoons are used
as a metaphor for culture and even for life itself.

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison
Figure 10.1
Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Seventh Lagoon of The Lagoon Cycle*, 1988, installation, Panels 3 and 4, 8 by 9½ feet each. Part of the artists' twelve-year work including text, photos, drawings, maps, site-specific artworks, and performance. Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All rights reserved. Photo by Barbara Lyter and Steve Oliver.
The story concerns two characters who begin a search for a "hardy creature who can live under museum conditions" and who are transformed by this search. The characters define themselves in *The First Lagoon* by the differences in their values and perceptions, with one naming himself Lagoon Maker and the other naming herself Witness. Both proceed to live up to their names, although they finally surrender them as circumstances push the two characters into constructing ever-larger frames for their discourse.

The Sixth Lagoon: On Metaphor and Discourse

*The Fifth Lagoon* deals with the Salton Sea, which was formed by flood flow released by human error from the canals along the Colorado River. *The Sixth Lagoon* treats the entire Colorado River basin. Lagoon Maker and Witness reflect on the insights they have gained through observing aquatic systems. They expand the scale of their thinking from the Salton Sea to the Colorado River watershed, which has been changed by lifestyles that demand vast amounts of electricity and irrigation. The exploding megatechnology of the twentieth century has shocked the environment and does not have time to "niche itself in." Witness sees all nature as a discourse between the elements, and both characters urge, "Pay attention to the discourse between belief systems and environmental systems":

Pay attention to the flow of waters
Pay attention to the integrity of the waters
flowing
Pay attention to where the waters are flowing
Pay attention to where the waters desire
to flow
Pay attention to where the waters are
willed to flow
Pay attention to the flow of waters and
the mixing of salts
Pay attention to the flow of waters and
the mixing with earth
Attend to the integrity of the discourse
between earth and water the watershed
is an outcome
Pay attention to the discourse between earth water and men interruption is an outcome

Pay attention to the meaning of the nature of such discourse and the nature of the meaning of interruption. After all a discourse is a fragile transitory form an improvisation of sorts

And anyone may divert a discourse of any kind into another direction if they do not value its present state

Pay attention to changes of state

For instance

If the flow of the waters of the Colorado River system has been interrupted by dam after dam which demand of the river that it generate electricity and serve as a source of potable water for cities outside the watershed while requiring the river to act as a sewer for agricultural wastes then the state of the river has been changed and that change must reverberate back through the system

If the flow of waters has been made to behave like rain to irrigate millions of acres of arid land then the state of the land has been changed to give advantage to that which would not naturally grow and disadvantage to that which did

If the state of the water has been changed to disadvantage that which evolved in the flowing waters and give advantage to recent forms such as urbanization and industrialized agriculture then
since a steady output of industrialized energy must be spent
for the maintenance of the system
and the energy is electrical and of high voltage
and the energy is hydraulic and of high cost
concomitant beliefs have evolved that these
recent forms are valuable and self-justifying
and necessary
for the maintenance of life and well-being

Pay attention to the cost of belief

For instance
If
for millennia the fresh waters of the Colorado
and the salt waters of the gulf
have been improvising the form
and disputing the southern boundary
of the delta the silt-laden Colorado
dropping its load and extending the delta
the gulf with its thirty- to fifty-foot tidal bores
washing the delta away
but slowly retreating before the massive silt load
and if this dialogue has been interrupted
to divert the waters of the Colorado elsewhere
then
advantage has been given to the tides of the gulf
which will once more slowly seep up the delta
to again reclaim
the Colorado-irrigated farmlands
of Mexico
and the Imperial and Coachella valleys
and
disadvantage has been given
to that vegetation which had adapted
to the inconstant flow of waters
and to all parts of the life web
dependent upon those parts
already disadvantaged
and advantage has been given to Phoenix
Arizona the Denver plains
the Platte River the cities of Los Angeles
Long Beach San Diego
and the counties of Riverside Imperial
Orange Los Angeles and San Diego
and all of their populations and industries

Pay attention to the cost of the giving
of advantage and disadvantage

For instance
If the flow of waters within the Sri Lanka tank system
has been operating for more than 2,500 years
utilizing depressions in the ground for off-stream storage
and gently sloping canals to bring water to smaller tanks
and smaller tanks again
through the villages to the paddies
And if
the water in the canals serves for daily bathing
and washing
and as potable water
and as a sanctuary for fish and animals
and bird and plant life
Then
over time
the tank and the canal system has niched itself into the
ecology
and the state of the land has been minimally changed
giving advantage to such historic forms as villages and
farms
while not disadvantaging the rivers and riverine life
Thus
although a steady output of manual energy must be spent
in order to sustain the system
the energy spent is collaborative and of low force
the energy is harmonic and of low cost
Therefore

Shifting Positions toward the Earth
concomitant beliefs have not evolved that high-force high-energy systems are valuable and useful and necessary for the maintenance of life and well-being.

Pay attention to the cost of belief.
Pay attention to the state of belief.
Pay attention to the flow of belief and the willing of desire.
Pay attention to the system upon which desire is enacted and the system that generates desire.

Attend to the discourse between belief systems and environmental systems.
Pay attention to the meaning of the nature of such discourse and the nature of the meaning of redirection. After all a discourse is a fragile transitory form an improvisation of sorts and anyone may divert a discourse of any kind into another probable direction if they do not value its present direction.

Pay attention to the choosing of probable directions and the authorship of changes of state.
Pay attention to changes of state.

**The Seventh Lagoon: The Ring of Fire; The Ring of Water**
The Lagoon Maker and the Witness deal with enlarged perceptions of time and space, shape and size. For example, they envision the Pacific Ocean as an estuarial lagoon with “rivers feeding it like tiny streams.” They perceive that “the business of the universe” is conducted in an odd kind of dialog but that the business of technology is conducted as a monologue that has become more seductive and “does not like that which is not itself.” Lagoon Maker and Witness begin a search for new guiding
metaphors to replace those of force and fire, as they perceive the accelerating greenhouse effect as nature's response to the millennia of force and fire. Finally, they muse, the oceans will rise gracefully, but will people withdraw with equal grace?

Now I see the Ring of Fire as
the wave front of an ocean of fire
beneath an ocean of water
mostly separated by rock

Of course a more literal mind
could see the mountains as froth
on top of a wave of fire
moving at the speed of
one to ten centimeters a year

And in less than a second
I can visualize any section of the Ring of Fire
the Kuril Trench for instance
with the Pacific plate subducting
uplifting the Kuril Islands thereby

And in less than a second I can shrink the Pacific
by orders of magnitude and make its size
no more than that of an estuarial lagoon

And in less than a second I can imagine
a corresponding simplification
of biocultural complexities
That would require reorienting consciousness
around a different data base

Sometimes I dream of the water buffalo
in its wallow in Sri Lanka
the one that ran afoul of the gasoline engine
and is being replaced by the tractor
Now that tractor does not replicate itself freely
nor provide milk nor utilize weeds as fuel
nor produce fertilizer and fuel with its dung
Yet the tractor maker would say that
the tractor is a bold invention
an improvisation that will change the state of farming
It is more efficient
it can cover more ground in a day
It is modern and cheap
and helps bring people into the technological domain

Yes
yet in some places the buffalo and its wallow still continue
their several-thousand-year-old discourse
their collaboration
and one of the consequences of redirecting their discourse
into the technological monologue will be a peculiar
subtraction of possibilities for gone will be the fish
that eats the larvae of the malaria mosquito
while itself serving as a source of protein
and gone will be the vermin-eating snake
that breeds in the wallow’s surrounds

while fertilizers will be added
and insecticides and herbicides

And the refugia disappears
though the tractor is not graceful on the land
and the buffalo will yield to that tractor
although the buffalo
finally
is more efficient
and its dialogue with the land
more lucid

Clearly there is something about
technology that does not like that
which is not itself

Yet this is not
a necessary condition
this unfriendliness
to the land

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison
I WHO DAMMED ALL THE RIVERS
WHO DAMMED ALL THE RIVERS AND MOST OF THE CREEKS THAT FLOW INTO THE DELTA AND THE BAYS
WHO DAMMED THE SACRAMENTO THE TRINITY THE MCCLOUD THE PITT FALL CREEK HAT CREEK COW CREEK STONY CREEK BATTLE CREEK PUTAH CREEK BUTT CREEK
WHO DAMMED OREGON CREEK CANYON CREEK FRENCH DRY CREEK THE SOUTH FORK AND THE MIDDLE FORK OF THE AMERICAN
WHO DAMMED THE RUBICON BRUSH CREEK SILVER CREEK TELLS CREEK GERLE CREEK DRY CREEK AND MOKELOMNE THE STANISLAUS THE TUOLUMNE ANGEL CREEK CHERRY CREEK SULLIVAN CREEK DAMMING AND REDAMMING

Shifting Positions toward the Earth
II FROM THE SATELLITE THE CENTRAL VALLEY IS ON FARM

WERE THEY "VISIONARY" PLANNERS INGENIOUSLY USING MODERN TECHNOLOGIES TO SECURE THE INHABITANTS OF CALIFORNIA FROM FLOOD AND DRAUGHT HAVE CONTROLLED THE FLOW OF WATER IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE INTERCONNECTED ARRAY OF RESERVOIRS DAMS POWER STATIONS PUMPING STATIONS DITCHES AND CANALS TO IRRIGATE THE CENTRAL VALLEY AND TO SEND WATER OVER THE TEHACHAPPI MOUNTAINS TO THE METROPOLITAN WATER DISTRICT IN THE SOUTH CREATING THE LARGEST IRRIGATION SYSTEM IN HISTORY GENERATING AN EIGHT BILLION DOLLAR INDUSTRY THAT SUPPLIES FOOD AND FIBER TO THE STATE THE NATION AND THE WORLD

AN IMPROBABLE PROFITABLE EXPANDABLE SYSTEM

WERE THEY "TECHNOCRATIC" PLANNERS SUBSIDIZED BY THE TAXPAYERS OF THE NATION AND IN HIDDEN INTEREST GIFTS BY THE STATE AT THE EXPENSE OF NONIRRIGATED FARMING ELSEWHERE PRIMARILY FOR THE PROFIT OF A FEW LARGE LANDHOLDERS AND AGribUSINESS HAVE TURNED THE ENTIRE WATERSHED OF THE CENTRAL VALLEY INTO ONE LARGE IRRIGATION SYSTEM SERVING OVER SIX AND ONE HALF MILLION ACRES COMPOSED OF DAMS THAT BECOME USELESS THROUGH SILTING A PUMPING SYSTEM THAT WILL USE MORE ENERGY THAN IT CREATES AND A DYKING SYSTEM THAT REQUIRES ONGOING
REPAIR THAT IN CONCERT REDUCE THE QUALITY AND LONG TERM PRODUCTIVITY OF BOTH THE LAND AND THE WATER THROUGH PROGRESSIVE SALINIZATION

AN ENERGY-EXPENSIVE SELF-CANCELLING SYSTEM


The nine texts of the Sacramento Meditations comprise the revised version of the work that was commissioned by the Floating Museum, San Francisco (director, Lynn Hershman), in 1976 and was hung in the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1977. The text and slides were slightly revised for an exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts gallery in New York that then traveled to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art (1980). The nine mappings of the state of California are a drawing, a satellite photo, a political boundary map, and maps of state and federal water projects, irrigable and potentially irrigable land and topology in duplicate.

The poster sketch contains eleven posters, each beginning with “For instance . . . if” and ending with “What if all that irrigated farming wasn’t necessary?” While Sacramento Meditations was hanging in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977, we put these posters up on street corners throughout San Francisco with the help of San Francisco Art Institute students and others; we also erected two huge brown and blue billboards that said “Water.” We wrote street graffiti on sidewalks in chalk, such as, “Somebody’s crazy, they’re draining the swamps and growing rice on the desert” and “Let every community empty its wastes upstream from where it takes its drinking water.” Performances at the Art Institute and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art included the simultaneous but slightly offbeat reading of a four-page water resources bibliography as a work scored for two voices. We showed a videotape of a Bakersfield (California) Water Board meeting on local TV, obtained several spots on local radio, performed readings of the work in situ, and published a series of bits of “advice” to important water personnel in the personal columns of a local paper. Each bit of “advice” was
Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *Meditations on the Condition of the Sacramento River, the Delta, and the Bays at San Francisco*, 1977, installation, Maps and text, with site-specific works of street graffiti, posters, billboard, personal newspaper advertisements and video. Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art.
derived from Buddha's eightfold path and applied to water. For instance, “Dear Ron Robie: Right water thought,” “Dear Jerry Brown: Right water action.”

The work owed its existence to six months of research at the Berkeley (California) water resources library, which displayed a set of the original posters for several years. All the information it presents that was not public knowledge when the work was first done has since become readily available. However, although 650,000 of the 6,500,000 acres under irrigation became too salty to farm long ago, the wetlands at the end of the reversed flow of the San Joaquin River have become deadly, and although several severe draughts in California have made people begin to question water priorities, subsidized intensive irrigated farming continues as usual through good times and bad.

THE SAVA RIVER PROJECT (ATEMPAUSE FÜR DEN SAVE FLUS) (1988)

In 1988, while on a Deutsche Akademische Austauch Dienst (DAAD) fellowship in Berlin, we were introduced to Yugoslavia by Hartmut Ern of the Berlin Botanical Gardens. He asked if we could not help with the formation of a nature reserve in the area that had once been a no-man’s land situated at the border between the former Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. After spending time in Yugoslavia and viewing the site, we felt that the idea of a nature reserve, although important, could not succeed in the long run because a reserve would suffer from all the problems of an island ecology and its uniqueness would be under attack from the surrounding industrial farming. Therefore, we proposed a nature corridor that would run the length of the Sava River from its twin beginnings above Ljubljana to its ending in Beograd where it joins the Danube River and supplies the lower Danube with one-third of its water.

Our work took the form of an exhibition—Atempause für den Save-Fluss: Die Summe Sener Geshichte, Beginn Einer Neuen Geshichte—funded by the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in cooperation with the Berliner Kunstlerprogram das DAAD and the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana.
But the Sava project was more than an exhibition; it was a proposal for change.

This is a work that wanted to happen. Support immediately appeared from many sources. All agreed that we should begin an address to this marvelous but obscure place—really a 340 square kilometer place, an island of biophysical providence and diversity, an exquisite cameo of cultural and ecological history existing within a 7,000 square kilometer factory farm.

It was obvious to us, as it is to all who pay attention to such things, that this island was under assault from petrochemical invasion and factory-farm wastes, that even the Sava River that flowed through it was under assault, and that the assault was and is both overt and covert. The defenders were few and mainly passive, and it seemed to us that the strategy of its defense was a guarantee of defeat. It had all the limitations of the Maginot Line. Therefore, we began to invent a work building support for the allocation of territory as a nature reserve but recontextualizing its strategy, generating a new set of tactics for the nature corridor. The manifestation of the story of this place was larger than the nature reserve itself.

Since we first made the Sava proposal, the aftermath of Chernobyl led the Slovenian and Serbian peoples to consider shutting down a relatively safe American-made nuclear energy plant and trying to construct a series of ten to fifteen dams on the Sava to replace nuclear power with hydroelectric power. This would turn the Sava into a series of lakes and effectively kill the river. Our work served as a rallying point and a counterproposal for the opponents of this idea. This work was supported by the Croatian Water Department and the Department of Nature Protection. The nature reserve was declared, and the corridor was being considered. Until the tragic invasion of Croatia, the even more tragic ethnic cleansing attack on Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the ensuing ongoing disaster, the World Bank was going to support the clean-up of the Sava River. Since then we have heard that the invasion has severely damaged, if not destroyed, the nature reserve, and Yugoslavia has remained a series of separate warring states.
TIBET

For two decades, we have pursued the art of conversation. Over the years we have created photographs, maps, drawings, poems, and performance scores that document a diverse array of conversations, most of which take up the issue of global survival. The specific subject matter ranges across a wide spectrum of eco-political issues, often generating new metaphors that in turn are the basis for proposals and projects.

What follows is a proposal for the early stages of a conversation about one million square miles of emerging man-made desert in what used to be the rainforests of Tibet. We are exploring the potential of pulling together a team of experts to create an “analog” forest—a proposal that seems to run parallel to the Dalai Lama’s vision of a “world peace park.” As envisioned, the analog forest would be only 20 percent as complex as the ecosystem it replaces but would behave in much the same way. Its future survival would be aided by the presence of species most useful to man if harvested selectively.

Tibet is the High Ground

FOR THIS PROJECT, WE INTEND

To create a very large-scale model of Asia, where Tibet as the High Ground is manifest and the Seven Principal Rivers of Southeast Asia—the Indus, Yellow, Yangtze, Salween, Mekong, Brahma Putra, and Ganges Rivers—are clearly stated. This model would make obvious the implications of the deforestation of Tibet for the many nations of the continent of Asia.

To come to a clarified statement of the research on the outcome to the rivers, riverine life, and riverine surrounds, including the dams and other river projects, in other countries as well as Tibet, of the deforestation of Tibet.

To develop a conceptual design for the regeneration of Tibetan forest, farm, meadowland. We would hold that a conceptual design for this kind of transformation carries a moral force in advance of criticism of any kind.

To develop a conceptual model that envisions a probable life Web for the deforested area of Tibet. This ecological model, working with the idea of an analog forest or a simplified woodland-rainforest ecosystem, would also have
yields of recognizable value to those who inhabit the surrounds. The process would suggest an analog for the forest that once existed, less complex than the original but nonetheless with overstory, understory, canopy, and appropriate niches. This forest would also serve to conserve existing or replaced topsoil and protect riverine and wetland ecologies—first in Tibet proper and then in the countries below.

More is at stake here than the simple regeneration of a new kind of forest. The forest knits Tibet, China, Nepal, Kashmir, Bhutan and all the bordering countries together from an ecological point of view. The rivers that spring from Tibet are also waters that bind these countries. We would hold that a conceptual design expressing these understandings can be the basis for generating conversation based on common interest as opposed to conflicting interest.

We hold that putting in place a working model of this kind is a necessary addition to the present discourse on saving the Tibetan culture, peoples, and children and is necessary to preserve the terrain from emerging abuses such as atomic waste dumping.

As we stated earlier, we believe that the universe is a giant conversation and that any introduction of new ideas, new metaphors, or new possibilities can change that conversation. Although we have built works, we think that changes in the conversation that lead to attitudinal and behavioral changes are as significant as any "built" work.

NOTES
1. This work was commissioned by the Metromedia Company and is presently in its collection.

2. A catalog of this work with full-color illustrations exists in German, English, and Slovene, with translations into Serbo-Croatian, French, and Japanese. The text, with several accompanying black-and-white images, has been reprinted in the Journal of International Synergy. The work has been exhibited in Berlin at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, in Zagreb (Croatia), in Ljubljana (Slovenia), at the Centre International d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, at the Palmer Museum at Penn State University, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York, at Washington University in Saint Louis (Missouri), and at the Nagoya Biennale in Japan in 1991, where it won second prize. The work was part of a traveling exhibition entitled Fragile Ecologies, which toured the United States for three years, beginning at the Queens Museum in New York.
3. We wish to offer our thanks to Hartmut Em and Martin Schneider-Jacoby of the Siftung Europäisches Naturerbe (European Natural Heritage Fund) for their generous ongoing assistance in the Sava River Project. In addition, our work has been made possible by the support of the Water Department of Croatia, the Nature Protection Agency of Croatia, the Croatian Zoological Society, the Natural History Museum of Zagreb, and various other official and semiofficial organizations.